

Author: Kureha
Illustrator: Yamigo



The White Cat's Revenge

as Plotted from the
Dragon King's Lap





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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Character Introductions](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: The New Guard](#)

[Chapter 2: Fourier](#)

[Chapter 3: The Visitors](#)

[Chapter 4: The Girl Named Sango](#)

[Chapter 5: To The Imperial Nation](#)

[Chapter 6: Emperor Adularia](#)

[Chapter 7: Special Medicine](#)

[Chapter 8: The First Patient](#)

[Chapter 9: The Truth Revealed](#)

[Chapter 10: Until Things Are Resolved](#)

[Chapter 11: Return Home](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Side Story: Rutile and Finn](#)

[Side Story: Gibeon and the Reapers](#)

[Bonus Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



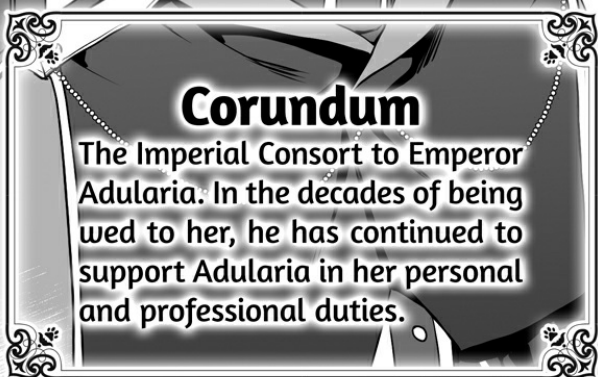
Jade

The young and wise ruler of the Nation of the Dragon King. Takes Ruri, a Beloved, into his care. In contrast to his cool and suave appearance, he has a soft spot for all things cute and cuddly. Dotes on Ruri, his wife.

Ruri Morikawa

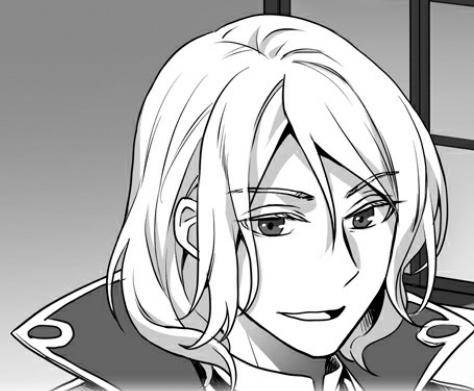
A girl summoned to an alternate world after getting wrapped up in her childhood "friend's" nonsense. She is a Beloved, a person with mana that spirits find especially attractive. By putting on a special bracelet, she can transform into a white cat. Trouble has abounded during her newlywed life with Jade.

Character Introductions



Corundum

The Imperial Consort to Emperor Adularia. In the decades of being wed to her, he has continued to support Adularia in her personal and professional duties.



Quartz

The previous Dragon King. A mild-mannered and gentle man with the smile of an angel. Jade looks up to him as if he were an older brother. He loves his mate, Seraphie, with her ethereal body, and continues to live with her to this date.



Rutile

The female dragonkin soldier who serves as Ruri's bodyguard. She's also Finn's fiancée.



Sango

A young girl with dark hair and dark eyes whom the spirits adore. She doesn't seem to be of this world, but who is she...?

Prologue

The Imperial Nation was one of the four major nations. Compared to the other nations—the Nations of the Spirit, Dragon, and Beast Kings respectively—the majority of the Imperial Nation was composed of humans. Also, the number of individuals who could use magic in comparison to demi-humans was exceedingly small, and none were built with powerful bodies like dragonkin. Therefore, despite it being one of the four major nations, if they were to come to blows with any of the other three nations, they would most likely be rendered powerless.

Be that as it may, it was a fact that the Imperial Nation boasted overwhelming authority and national power among the other human nations, and seeing as how many of those were situated around it, it naturally became the flagship nation for the human race.

The Imperial Nation itself had always been a congregation of many different nations. Long ago, the entire area had been a virtual sea of smaller countries, all of which had waged war ceaselessly for supremacy. By absorbing these countries little by little, the Imperial Nation had managed to become the juggernaut it was today.

The current ruler of the Imperial Nation was Emperor Adularia. Rulers weren't decided by strength as they were in the Nation of the Dragon King, but instead by bloodline. Since Adularia was an only child, there had been no battle over the succession to the throne. However, Adularia was still in her teens when she became emperor, so her fiancé, and later the imperial consort, Corundum, had helped the far-too-young and inexperienced leader through the early years.

The couple was still happily married after decades together, and they had four children, the imperial princes—the firstborn, Roy; the second, Mariano; the third, Samadan; and the fourth, Orio. The princes were not very far apart in age, but none of them were particularly close or distant from one another. They were simply regular brothers. All of them were exquisite examples of imperial

princes, but because Adularia was still young herself—in her forties—a successor had yet to be named.

Perhaps that was the reason a battle for succession had been silently brewing behind the scenes via the nobles. The silver lining was that since Adularia was in good mental and physical health, there wasn't a more bombastic conflict in progress, but it was still the biggest headache that she currently faced. It was only exacerbated by the fact that her first son, Roy, and her third son, Samadan, were leading the initiative.

Corundum and his aides began to discuss whether it was time to name a successor in order to prevent further chaos from ensuing...and that was when it happened. Adularia suddenly fell ill. While optimistic at first that she would soon recover, her symptoms only grew worse. With the cause of her illness unknown even to the nation's doctors, she finally got to a point where she couldn't leave the bed.

Alas, given that not a single medicine they tried helped, as a final measure, Corundum and his aides sent a messenger to the Dragon King—to seek the special medicine made from dragon blood. As Adularia's condition worsened and worsened, the imperial consort awaited a response on tenterhooks.

Chapter 1: The New Guard

Some time had passed since everyone had returned from the Nation of the Spirit King to the Nation of the Dragon King. Gibeon, the young man they'd brought back to the kingdom, was quickly getting used to life at the castle, perhaps due to his friendly personality. He also gained respect for Heat and would occasionally travel down to the shop Heat frequented—the one run by Ruri's mother, Riccia.

Ruri couldn't help but roll her eyes at how Gibeon always came to respect the wrong people. In fact, she wanted to ask him what part of Heat he actually respected. Were they just resonating as fellow womanizers?

Not only was Ruri worried as to whether Gibeon would cause issues for other people, but so was Jade, the person who'd decided to bring the young man back with them in the first place. Thanks to Riccia, though, who'd been keeping a watchful eye on Gibeon at the shop, Gibeon had been on his best behavior.

When Ruri would ask Riccia about him, she would reply, "He is a very good boy!" Perhaps Riccia had a knack for being an animal trainer, because it wasn't just Gibeon who was affected by her influence, but Heat as well, who was as docile as a lamb while in her presence. Though she was Ruri's mother, she was a frightening force to be reckoned with. Ruri had asked her mother the secrets to her success, but Riccia would simply smile and not answer. Nevertheless, Ruri could take solace in the fact that Heat and Gibeon were both terrified of Riccia behind her back.

Although Joshua had been assigned to keep tabs on Gibeon when Gibeon first started leaving the castle, the surveillance on him had been lifted, given the current situation and the fact that he was doing a fine job helping Euclase with their work.

Not only had Gibeon infiltrated the Nation of the Spirit King's castle, but he'd also kidnapped a sacred beast cub, special animals that were under the nation's exclusive care. He'd even taken Ruri, a Beloved, as a hostage. On the other

hand, Gibeon was originally the prince of a kingdom, and because he'd done whatever it took to survive after the collapse of his homeland, there was a margin for sympathy. Although everyone had been on the lookout for him to cause problems because of his ridiculous track record, it seemed that Jade had trusted Gibeon enough to remove the secret security he had on him.

As an aside, Joshua, who'd been watching Gibeon around the clock, was pleased as punch that he was free at long last.

Unfortunately, whenever Riccia wasn't around, Gibeon would hit on women without a second thought, and today, as usual, when he spotted Ruri, he came running toward her with arms wide open.

"Aah, there you are, my beloved Ruri~! It's me, your wonderful lover, Gibeon!"

Ruri twitched in fear as she sensed Jade's mood souring beside her. Whether Gibeon couldn't see Jade's expression or he was just plain ignoring it, he ran straight over and...took a kick from Jade square to the stomach.

"Oof!"

"This is *my* Ruri!" Jade declared, looking at Gibeon as if he were an insignificant worm. "She has never been yours for even a second. Now, stay away from her."

While Ruri didn't mind Jade dealing with Gibeon, she did hope that Jade would stop constricting her in his arms as if he were trying to physically prove that she belonged to him. It was making it hard to breathe.

"Waah, Ruri~! The Dragon King is bullying meee!" Gibeon cried, doubled over. He reached out his hand toward Ruri...but Jade mercilessly stomped on it and started grinding his heel. "Gaaah! That really hurts! That hurts, no joke!"

"Then be gone and never be seen again," Jade replied.

Ruri had lost count of how many times she'd seen this exact exchange. Considering that Gibeon never backed off, it almost appeared as though he was actually enjoying the situation. Rumors had been floating around the castle that he was a huge masochist, and Jade being Jade, he would always end up entertaining Gibeon.

“Ha ha haah...” Ruri’s dry chuckle turned into a sigh as she watched what had become a part of her daily routine. She then shot an exasperated look at Gibeon, who’d finally gotten back to his feet. “I wish you would just give up already if you know you’re going to get beat down every time.”

“As your officially approved lover, I can’t let this little obstacle get the better of me,” gloated Gibeon with a smug look on his face.

That, unfortunately, only worsened Jade’s mood, and he shouted, “You’re not officially approved for *anything*!”

“Now, now, Jade-sama, settle down,” Ruri said. She was worried that he would burst a blood vessel sooner or later. “This is just the way Gibeon is, so if you keep getting angry every single time he acts this way, then you’ll never see the end of it.”

“Yes, I know. I know that, but...” Jade trailed off, trying his best to contain himself.

Sadly, Gibeon couldn’t take a hint, and he wasted Ruri’s effort in no time. “Yeah, if you keep getting angry like that, Ruri will get fed up with you~! Oh, but then again, if that does happen, then I guess it’s my job to tenderly comfort her as her lover. My arms are always open, after all~!”

Ruri’s eyes widened in shock as Jade silently picked up his sword.

“Uh-oh, this is bad,” Gibeon said, seeming to finally understand that he’d taken things too far. He grimaced and ran away like a bat out of hell.

Jade tossed his sword at Gibeon’s back mid-stride, but the barrier around him deflected it, and it ended up sticking into the wall beside him. Although its force had been diminished by bouncing off the barrier, the sword stuck deep into the stone wall. It had so much initial force behind it that it made one wonder how hard Jade had thrown it. The attack would have skewered Gibeon for sure if he hadn’t been blessed by the Spirit of Light.

“Tch, it missed,” Jade grumbled, clicking his tongue in extreme disappointment.

Naturally, the blood drained from Gibeon’s face. “Wait, wait, wait! You actually tried to kill me by throwing that, didn’t you?!”

“Of course,” Jade admitted.

“Is that any way for the *Dragon King* to act?! Your approval rating with your subjects is gonna tank if you keep up that narrow-minded attitude, you know!” Gibeon fussed, albeit timidly and from a considerable distance away, but once he saw Jade pull another sword from his pocket space, he quickly fled.

Jade clicked his tongue in disappointment yet again while Ruri awkwardly chuckled. Jade then turned his attention to Ruri, staring intently into her eyes before taking her into a very deep and public embrace.

Only dragonkin were passing by the area, so no one even batted an eye at them for getting affectionate in the middle of the flow of traffic. It was a common sight among the dragonkin, after all. Actually, Jade’s shows of affection were apparently milder than others of his race. Ruri was curious how other mates maintained their marital relationships, but if their actions were even more intense than Jade’s, then she would probably need to muster up some courage before asking.

“It was a mistake to bring him back with us. Maybe I should ship him away now. No, actually...” Jade suddenly turned to Kotaro, who had been standing next to the pair. “Lord Kotaro, are you any good at assassination?”

It was quite an unsettling question—one that should never have been asked.

“Yes, since I am the Spirit of Wind, that is my forte. I am willing, so long as it is necessary to protect Ruri.”

Jade silently nodded, but Ruri naturally couldn’t be willfully oblivious to all of this.

“Jade-sama, Kotaro, what are you two plotting?!” she questioned.

“Ruri, that cad will only cause you harm. We should get rid of him while we can, don’t you think?”

“I concur,” Kotaro added.

“Well, I don’t! Don’t you dare do that, Kotaro! Got it?!” Ruri said sternly.

Kotaro dropped his tail, his shoulders slumping, and reluctantly said, *“Grr... If you insist, Ruri...”*

“That goes for you too, Jade-sama!”

“Fine...” Jade looked extremely conflicted, but after a long pause, he begrudgingly nodded. However, dissatisfied with taking things lying down, he suddenly spoke as if genius had struck him.

“Yes, I’ve got it. I’ll assign you a personal guard, Ruri.”

“Huh?” Ruri uttered.

“I’ve been considering the idea for a while. Ewan also suggested that I assign you someone who could keep you under control, since you’re so needlessly active.”

“Ewan, you twerp.”

Ewan apparently still had a chip on his shoulder from when Ruri had gone out and about in the Nation of the Spirit King without any consideration. She could understand where Ewan was coming from, but having a guard with her from sunup to sundown was too stifling.

“Jade-sama, that won’t be necessary. I have Kotaro and the other spirits,” she assured him.

“No, spirits and people see things differently. While I know you’re in good hands with the supreme-level spirits, I think you’ll need a guard all the same—one of the same sex.”

“You mean a female guard? A dragonkin?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

As far as Ruri could recall, she’d never seen a female dragonkin soldier. Several of the maids who attended to her personal needs were dragonkin, and female soldiers of different races were around, but she’d never met one that was a dragonkin. She frequented the dragonkin training grounds in Sector Five, but all she ever saw were men.

“There is someone like that around here?” she asked. “I’ve never seen a female dragonkin soldier myself.”

“Dragonkin women are strong, of course, but there is a clear gap between them and the men,” Jade explained. “Also, in contrast to the men, most of them

are more docile and dislike fighting, so it's uncomfortable for them to undergo the same training as the battle-crazed men. Consequently, the majority of female dragonkin end up being officials or maids, but that doesn't mean none are soldiers. While they rarely show up at the training grounds, they indeed exist."

"Oh wow, is that a fact?"

"There's actually a capable female soldier that's scheduled to return from the Imperial Nation soon, so I'll assign her to you."

"Are you sure you should be deciding that on the spur of the moment? You should really ask what she would like to do first. I would feel bad if she were assigned to be my guard if she didn't want to be."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I'm sure you two will get along just fine. Once she arrives, I'll arrange for you two to meet so you can feel each other out."

Days later, Jade came to Ruri's room, a tall, slender woman behind him. She was most likely the female soldier that he had been talking about.

The slacks and jacket-style military uniform suited her very well, and she reminded Ruri of one of those classic stories of beautiful women disguised as men. Her long, lustrous red hair was pulled up high into a ponytail, which complemented her looks further and accentuated her refined elegance. She was so sleek and beautiful that Ruri found herself entranced at the sight of her.

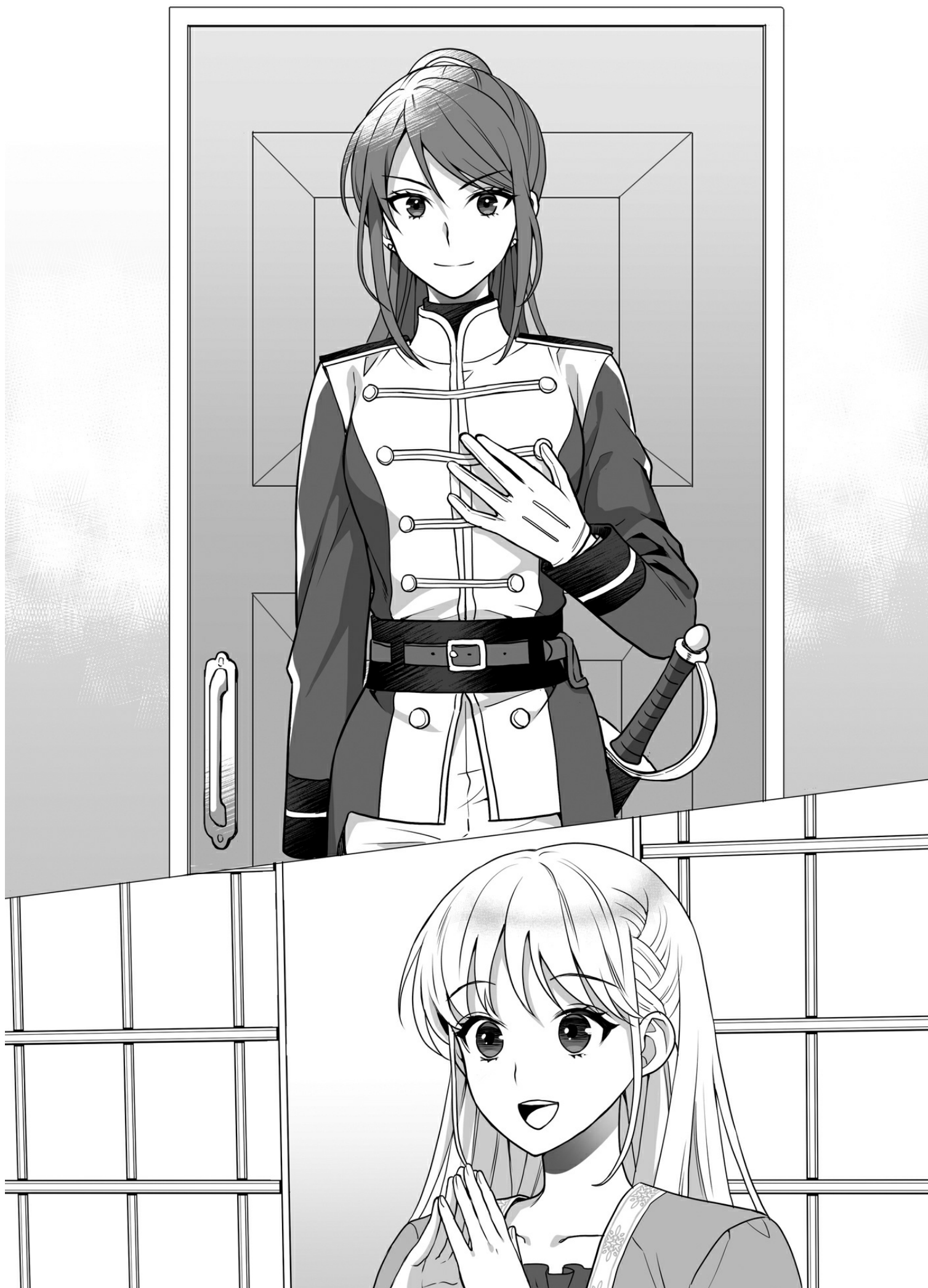
"Jade-sama, who might that be?" Ruri asked.

"This is the guard I spoke of before. Her name is Rutile. She has been away in the Imperial Nation for a few years and just returned today. That must be why you've never met her before."

Rutile flashed a smile sweet enough to charm even a woman and bowed before Ruri. Ruri hurriedly rose from her seat.

"Very nice to finally meet you, Lady Beloved. My name is Rutile."

"I'm Ruri. Everyone just calls me Ruri, so that will do. I prefer to be called by my name rather than 'Lady Beloved.'"



Ruri had grown used to being referred to as simply “Beloved” or variants of such, but she felt more comfortable with her actual name. Since one wouldn’t refer to someone they were close to by their title, Ruri wanted Rutile to get used to calling her by name if she was going to be around Ruri all the time as her personal guard.

“Very well, milady,” Rutile replied.

“Oh, and could you drop the overly formal speech as well? Unlike Celestine-san and the Nation of the Beast King, everyone in this castle speaks to me in a more casual manner, so no pressure.”

Rutile stared at Ruri’s face, then, in the next moment, she smiled cheerfully at her. “I’ll do just that, then, Ruri.”

Despite being a woman herself, Ruri’s cheeks flushed in reaction to Rutile’s winning smile.

“Wow, she’s gorgeous,” Ruri murmured, giddy from the beauty before her—a beauty different from someone like Euclase. She even felt the urge to call her “onee-sama,” a term only reserved for the most beautiful of younger ladies in her world.

Jade, on the other hand, furrowed his brow and gave Rutile a stern look. “Rutile, don’t seduce my Ruri.”

Rutile looked stunned, then broke out into laughter. “Tee hee. I’m not someone you should be feeling jealous of, Your Majesty.”

“You are popular among everyone, regardless of race. Too popular, in fact. I asked you to guard Ruri because I thought you’d get along, but perhaps I hired the wrong person for the job?” Jade uttered, seriously pondering his decision.

Ruri panicked. “No, Rutile-san is just fine! Absolutely, positively fine!” Ruri desperately pleaded for Rutile to stay despite knowing nothing about her as a person yet. Her intuition was telling her to not let Rutile get away.

“If you insist, then I’ll assign you Rutile, but be careful. Rutile is a tremendous flirt.”

“Pardon? What do you take me for, Your Majesty?” Rutile asked with a wry

grin.

Ruri felt she more or less got the gist. Rutile's charm was so intense that a mere smile from her was enough to make one abandon their thoughts and agree to whatever she said.

"Well, whatever. You must be tired after just getting home. You can start guard detail after taking a few days off, so why don't you go see Finn?" Jade suggested.

Rutile thought about it for a second and then nodded. "Right, I think I will. Given the time, I assume Finn is at the training grounds?"

"That he is."

Ruri was curious about the exchange she'd just overheard. "Is Rutile-san friends with Finn-san?" she asked, assuming that must have been the case since Finn's name was dropped right away. However, the response she received was not what she'd expected.

"Finn is my fiancé," Rutile replied.

Ruri's brain couldn't comprehend what she'd heard for a second, but after a short pause, she blurted, "You're his *what?!?*"



After their introduction, Ruri accompanied Rutile down to the training grounds.

"Are you really, *really* engaged to Finn-san?" Ruri asked over and over, incredibly skeptical, but she was met with the same affirmation every time.

"Yes, I am. Is it that hard to believe?" Rutile asked.

"No, it's not hard to believe, it's just that I've never heard Finn-san mention anything about women in general."

"That's to be expected. Finn always has a guard dog with him, one that gets in a very bad mood whenever I'm brought up," Rutile replied with a light chuckle.

Ruri knew immediately who she was referring to. "Aah, right. Ewan has a pretty bad brother complex."

Ewan was the type of guy who took being called “Brother-Complex Extraordinaire” as a compliment rather than a dis. She could understand why Finn never talked about women. After all, when Finn had been her guard when she first came to the nation, Ewan had lashed out at her when he found out that she was a human woman. What a death-defying thing to do to a Beloved. If he’d done that in the Nation of the Beast King, they would have had his head.

“By your reaction, I take it Ewan is the same as always?” Rutile asked.

“Yes, he follows Finn-san anytime, anywhere,” Ruri confirmed.

“Well, I can’t wait to see him, then.”

“You ‘can’t wait’ to see him?”

“That’s right.”

Ruri thought that Rutile would be more annoyed to see Ewan than anything. As Finn’s fiancée, it was probably unbearable having such an incessant brother-in-law. Ruri knew she herself couldn’t take it, at least. That was one extra headache she definitely didn’t want to sign up for. While she could deal with Ewan as a friend, she could safely say that she couldn’t tolerate him as a brother-in-law. She could only imagine Ewan tagging along on dates and raising a big, mood-killing stink.

As their conversation started winding down, they arrived at the training grounds in Sector Five. The sight of blood spraying all over the grounds had become business as usual for Ruri—a fact that frightened her. As soon as they scanned the area, they found Finn.

Ruri shouted at the stern-faced soldiers in the midst of training, and one of them noticed her—or more specifically, Rutile—and their jaw dropped. The uproar tipped off Finn, who looked over to the source of the commotion. Once he saw Rutile, his eyes went wide.

“Finn,” said Rutile as she made a beeline for him with a tender smile across her face.

Ruri held her cheeks in anticipation. She couldn’t hide her excitement about this potentially emotional reunion between two separated lovers.

As Ruri watched with bated breath, Rutile picked up the pace toward Finn, then pulled the sword at her hip and swung it down at him. Before the blade connected, Finn blocked the swipe, their weapons unleashing a loud metallic clang across the grounds.

Ruri was speechless. All she could do was utter, “Huh?”

As she stood in place, stunned, the two enjoyed a rendezvous far removed from the emotional reunion between lovers Ruri had hoped for. Actually, based on Finn’s arduous expression, it might have been just Rutile enjoying this little soiree.

Though Ruri couldn’t understand why this was happening, she noticed the other soldiers gathering around, hooting and hollering in excitement.

“So I guess Rutile really did come back.”

“Look how happy they are. I bet Finn is thrilled.”

“Of course he’s happy. His fiancée is back with him.”

Ruri vehemently disagreed with the pair of conversing soldiers. They weren’t locking arms in sweet bliss; they were locked in a bitter battle to the death. Ruri started to question her own senses as she failed to understand how they looked thrilled over anything.

Just then, a familiar voice came from a distance. “What do you think you’re *doiing*?!”

It was Ewan. He must have used his canine-like sense of smell to sniff out that his beloved older brother was in danger, because he was barreling toward them at breakneck speed.

“Who’s the fool who dares draw their blade against...my...brother...?” Ewan trailed off and suddenly slowed his pace upon seeing Rutile, who’d stopped clashing swords with Finn and turned around to look at him. “M-Ms. Rutile...? But why?!”

Despite Ewan’s pale face of dread, Rutile flashed him an invigorating and refreshing smile. “It’s been so long, Ewan. Still acting as Finn’s little tagalong per usual, are you?”

Finn sheathed his sword with a look of resignation as Ruri approached him.

“Um, Finn-san, are you all right?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s you, Ruri. Don’t worry. It happens all the time.”

“All the time?” Ruri repeated, her cheek twitching as Finn grinned awkwardly.

“Rutile is more battle-hungry than most dragonkin women. And, well, that is exactly why she can make it as a soldier. That exchange just now was Rutile’s way of saying hello.”

While Ruri could spot a lot of issues with their lovers’ reunion, seeing as how Finn wasn’t worried about it, it seemed best to let sleeping dogs lie. Maybe? Ruri couldn’t really decide.

“Gaaaaaah!”

Ewan suddenly screamed. Ruri and Finn turned to see Ewan flying into a wall on the opposite side of the grounds. He collided with said wall and got stuck in it, his eyes spinning around in his head. Some unsettling pops and cracks came from his body, which made everyone wonder if he was all right.

“Huh? Wha?!” A cold sweat dripped from her brow as Ruri struggled to figure out what had just happened.

Meanwhile, Finn gave Ewan a look that only a disappointed older brother could. “Ewan messed up again, did he?”

“Um, Finn-san... What just...?”

“Ewan probably got his just deserts for getting snippy with Rutile again. He does have a reckless streak in him whenever I’m involved. But it’s fine. Happens all the time. You needn’t worry, Ruri.”

“I ‘needn’t worry’...”

Despite being told not to worry, she did just that as she watched Rutile walk over to the wall and drag Ewan out by the lapels. She then proceeded to swing his body around and around. Ewan’s terrified screams echoed through the training grounds—a visual and auditory show that no one could possibly ignore. This, above all else, sent Ruri’s first impression of Rutile as a beautiful lady crumbling in no time.

As Ruri sifted through her shattered image of Rutile, Ewan approached death's door with each swing. Rutile finally let go, and he went soaring through the open skies, eventually hitting the ground like a beat-up old rag.

"Urghhh." Ewan groaned, the sad sound barely reaching the gathered crowd.

The soldiers began to talk among themselves.

"Yeesh, she's as ruthless as ever."

"Would have been more peaceful for Ewan if Rutile had never come back, wouldn't it?"

"That Ewan knows he can't stand up to Rutile, but he insists on attacking her? It always ends up like this."

"They say that Rutile is the strongest after Finn, so it's bound to happen. Ewan is just a dummy."

The onlookers were gossiping up a storm, but none of them were going to jump in to help. Or rather, none of them dared to jump in.

Rutile slowly walked over to Ewan, who lay face down on the ground, and lifted him up with one hand, flashing that captivating smile as she said, "I think it's great that you adore Finn so much, and I commend you for warding off other women, but I advise you *not* to lump me in with those intrusive flies that need swatting away."

"Urk..."

"Am I clear?"

"Yes, Ms. Rutile."

Satisfied with his answer, Rutile smiled sweetly before tossing—no, dropping—him on the ground like a sack of garbage. Ewan lay motionless, as if to say that he didn't have the strength to move.

Rutile left him and walked back with a jaunty skip in her step, smiling at Finn as she said, "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Finn glanced at Ewan, and his face contorted into a conflicted grimace.

"U-Um, Finn-san? Is Ewan..." Ruri began.

“He’ll be fine from that,” Rutile answered. “I just gave him a little attitude adjustment.”

“‘Attitude adjustment’?” Ruri repeated.

Everyone knew it was much more than that, but no one tried to correct her. Ruri had a hunch that this was going to be a daily occurrence at this point.

Feeling sorry for the young man just lying listlessly on the ground, and with no one else going to help him, Ruri went over to collect him.



In Jade’s office, where his aides were assembled, the newly returned Rutile handed Jade a letter from the Imperial Nation. It was from the imperial consort, Corundum, and it stated that Adularia had fallen ill. The rest of the letter contained a sincere request for the medicine made from dragon blood since no other medicine was having any effect.

After reading the letter, Jade passed it over to Quartz, who was standing beside him. Quartz, the previous Dragon King, had only met Adularia a few times in the past, which made sense considering that Adularia had ascended the throne after Quartz stepped down as Dragon King and left the nation. Still, considering that he was often left as Jade’s standin whenever Jade was absent, he also needed to know the contents of the letter.

As Quartz scanned the note, Jade asked Rutile, “Is Adularia’s condition that bad?”

“It would seem so. While I was not able to meet her in person, His Imperial Consort said that she couldn’t even get herself out of bed.”

A grim shadow fell over Jade’s face. “And no medicine is working?”

“No, and the medical care in the Imperial Nation is just as advanced as ours. I am certain that if we were to send over our doctors, the results would be the same. That is likely why they’ve resorted to asking for a drug said to cure any wound or sickness.”

“Yes, that does make sense.”

Only dragonkin knew how to make the special medicine with dragon blood,

which was why it was such a precious commodity. So much so, in fact, that not even the top leaders of nations could obtain it on a moment's notice. However, because this was a request from an allied nation and a close friend, there was no reason to refuse. Also, all of this couldn't have happened at a worse time.

"Currently, the first and third imperial princes are silently fighting for succession through the nobles," Rutile explained. She was very familiar with the nation's politics due to her stay there. "The emperor has not yet named a crown prince, so if anything were to happen to her now, it could spark a huge war."

"What about the other princes?" Jade asked.

"The second prince has just finalized arrangements to wed a princess from a neighboring nation and marry into her family, so I doubt he is after the throne, especially since he wanted this marriage of his own accord and not because of political reasons."

"And the fourth?"

"The youngest prince is apparently gentler, quieter, and more timid than the other princes, so the nobles have deemed him unsuited for the role of emperor. As a result, he doesn't have many nobles in his corner. The battle for the throne is likely to be waged by the first and third."

"So I see." Jade pressed his temples as if to suppress a headache. "If Adularia were to die now, then it would majorly impact the surrounding nations as well."

Rutile nodded. "Yes, I agree, Your Majesty."

Jade looked at each of his aides, and they all nodded, unanimously agreeing as well.

"Then let's hurry and give them the dragon's blood," Jade decided after gauging his aides' reactions.

"Wait a second," interrupted Quartz. "This illness that the emperor is afflicted with... Did you ask about her symptoms in detail, Rutile?"

"N-No, I'm afraid I don't have much medical training, so I didn't ask. Although, I am sure that they will give you a full description if you so inquire. Is there

something on your mind, sir?”

“Well, Master Quartz?” Jade asked with a bewildered look.

“I believe the symptoms were briefly mentioned in the letter, but was that not sufficient?” Rutile prompted.

“They’re similar,” said Quartz.

“Similar to what?” questioned Jade. Quartz’s intense expression was causing him and everyone around him to feel uneasy.

“To the symptoms leading to Seraphie’s death,” Quartz finally answered.

Everyone was taken aback by Quartz’s response.

Seraphie had fallen ill despite being Quartz’s mate. Once one became a dragonkin’s mate, they were supposed to become sturdier and less susceptible to illness, but she’d succumbed all the same. Not only that, but Jade had heard that the cause of her sickness was never identified and was incurable even with the dragon’s blood on hand. As a result, Seraphie ended up dying—a fact that everyone in attendance was well aware of.

Tension began to race through the air.

“Then again, if I’m worrying too much, disregard me. But if she doesn’t improve even with the dragon’s blood, then...” Quartz trailed off.

Jade had never even considered that the dragon’s blood might not cure Adularia. If it didn’t, then they would be out of ideas. Even for dragonkin, medicine made from dragon blood was used as a last resort.

One could only imagine what was running through Quartz’s mind at the moment. His expression was stiff, and his eyes were filled with sadness and pain. Everyone present could tell that he was most likely thinking of when he lost his wife, the person he loved more than anyone else in the world.

Just then, Seraphie phased into the room from Quartz’s ring and took him into her embrace. Although devoid of her physical body and her warmth, she squeezed Quartz tightly with her arms, assuring him, “I’m here for you, Quartz. I’ll always be with you.”

“Yes, you’re right. You are right here,” Quartz replied, gently smiling down at

Seraphie before looking forward again. “Sorry. I got a little personal there, didn’t I?”

“No, don’t worry,” Jade replied. “It was justified. We’ll ask him to keep us up-to-date with the situation, just in case.”

“Yes, that would be somewhat assuring. After all, it’s not certain that it’s just a run-of-the-mill illness,” Quartz noted, tapping his finger on the last paragraph of the letter.

Jade nodded, his expression stern. “You mean the Reapers, correct?”

The letter from Corundum also contained information of concern aside from Adularia’s sickness.

“Yes, the part that says there were signs of the Reapers being in Adularia’s bedroom,” Quartz confirmed.

Jade knit his brow.

The order of assassins, the Reapers, were a group that accepted any request so long as they were paid, and they always carried out their jobs without fail. It was said that if one were a target of the Reapers, one was as good as dead.

Some time ago, Ruri had been targeted by assassins, but they’d turned out to be a couple of fakes impersonating the Reapers. Corundum said that he knew of the fakes, which made it hard to determine whether they were dealing with the real thing or not this time around.

“He mentioned that there was proof they’d been there,” Quartz reiterated.

They said that whenever a Reaper took on a job, they always left a paper with a drawing of a black sickle with their target, and they’d found one of these drawings near Adularia’s pillow. Whether this was the handiwork of a real or fake Reaper, someone had definitely entered the emperor’s room under tight security—a feat which must have sent chills down the spines of Corundum and his aides.

“Do you think that this Reaper slipped in some sort of poison?” asked Jade.

Quartz shook his head. “I can’t say anything for certain, but if that is what’s going on, then that actually works to our advantage. The dragon’s blood can

cure poisoning, after all.”

“Good point,” Jade muttered, silently praying that would be the case.

And so Jade shipped the elixir made of dragon blood off to the Imperial Nation.

Chapter 2: Fourier

Rutile was now officially Ruri's assigned bodyguard. That being said, Ruri was already surrounded by Kotaro, Rin, and the other spirits, so she was in absolutely no danger. Rutile's role essentially went from bodyguard to chatting partner, and this worried Ruri.

"Um, are you really sure it was a good idea to become my guard, Rutile-san?" Ruri asked her.

"What might you mean by that?" Rutile inquired.

"I mean, according to Ewan and the other dragonkin, you're the strongest and most capable soldier after Finn-san. I just think that making you be a conversational partner who's a guard in name only is a waste of your talents. It makes me feel bad just thinking about it."

Rutile could have been in a more relevant position, but she was here instead. It seemed more like a demotion, if anything. Ruri was worried that Rutile might be dissatisfied with being her personal tea-drinking buddy on an almost daily basis.

Rutile was as much of a flirt as Jade had said, and she was extremely popular among everyone—including women. Once the castle's ladies found out that Rutile would be around Ruri twenty-four seven, they seethed with envy. The maids would come to Ruri's room more frequently than usual and do chores that didn't necessarily need doing. They would then casually chat with Rutile all the while and leave looking satisfied.

This hadn't happened just one or two times either. A maid who'd been disappointed that Rutile was absent when she came informed Ruri that a secret war was being waged over who would get to see Rutile next. Ruri wanted to quip about their ulterior motives when they were supposed to be her caretakers, but it just went to show how popular Rutile was.

From what Ruri had heard, once the decision was made to send Rutile off to

the Imperial Nation, the women had all flooded Jade's office to complain. Jade must have had a hard time dealing with all of that; it wasn't hard to imagine how much of a panic it had caused at the time. The women must have been so happy they could cry now that Rutile had returned.

The maid had suggested that Ruri turn a blind eye to their actions since she suspected that the "Rutile fever" would last for quite some time. While Ruri didn't mind, she was starting to worry about Finn being engaged to someone as popular as Rutile, seeing as how someone could attack him one day out of jealousy. It was fortunate that Finn was second only to Jade in terms of strength. If he wasn't, then he probably would've been six feet under a long time ago. Still, Finn had to be vigilant moving forward, a fact that he knew all too well. He was the embodiment of bravery for deciding to get engaged to Rutile.

Ruri would have loved to hear how they ended up together, but Rutile would always skillfully dodge the question with that smile of hers. It was a shame, but at the moment, she was more concerned about whether it was okay for her to keep a celebrity like Rutile all to herself.

Ruri had just asked her that, but Rutile smiled softly and replied, "His Majesty told me that you lacked awareness as a Beloved, and it seems that is true."

"Oof, sorry," Ruri said, remembering how Ewan had chewed her out for the same thing before.

"I don't mean it out of anger," Rutile explained. "However, you are a Beloved, and Beloveds are very, *very* special in our world. The only people who would think that guarding a Beloved was a demotion are those who don't believe in spirits. For most people, serving in such an illustrious position would make them tremble in overwhelming joy."

"Hmm... A lot of people have told me that Beloveds are important, and I get that, but I guess I'm still not used to being one. Or more like, I can't really believe it," Ruri said. She'd been treated the complete opposite of that for decades in her world, so despite people repeatedly telling her that she was so important to this and that, it had never quite clicked for her. Values ingrained since childhood couldn't change overnight.

“His Majesty must have his work cut out for him,” Rutile said, sounding a bit awkward in spite of her normally cool demeanor.

“Jade-sama is a worrywart,” Ruri stated. “Kotaro always has a barrier up around me, so I’d never get injured.”

“Yes, but it is in a dragonkin’s nature to worry about their spouse. You should be careful not to let him worry too much, or he might end up confining you indoors. There have been past precedents, you know.”

“Ha ha ha... Don’t worry, I will!” Ruri replied, hoping that confinement would never be an option.

“Changing the subject...if the Spirit of Wind is giving you his protection, then would you care to go out into town?” Rutile asked.

“But you *just said* that I lacked awareness as a Beloved,” Ruri noted with a giggle, realizing that Rutile was contradicting herself.

“This is different. You must feel it’s stuffy being cooped up in the castle day in, day out, yes? You need a change of pace. Also, there’s something special happening in town, and if you miss it now, you will have to wait decades for it to happen again.”

“What would that be?” asked Ruri.

“You will just have to find out,” Rutile said with a smile, choosing not to elaborate.

The prospect of something “special” was alluring. Ruri had the urge to go, but there was an issue and his name was Jade.

Doubtful, Ruri said, “I wonder if Jade-sama will allow me to go?”

“If he doesn’t, then we will just sneak out,” Rutile replied with an impish grin.

“If he winds up trying to lock me up because of this, then you’re going to bail me out, okay?” Ruri declared, a grin forming on her face as well.

“But of course. His Majesty even told me himself to heed your orders first and foremost, so I will do all I can to help you. I am your personal guard, after all.”

Having gained a powerful ally, Ruri immediately walked into Jade’s office and

asked to go out. He quickly and painlessly approved. In fact, he gave his permission so easily that Ruri started to worry instead of rejoice.

“Huh? Wait, what is wrong with you, Jade-sama?! You usually won’t allow me to go out. Did you eat anything strange?” Ruri even had her bracelet ready in order to turn into a cat and beg, just in case he said no.

“Ruri, what do you take me for?” Jade asked.

She wanted to say, “an overprotective cuddling addict,” but she bit her tongue.

“I had originally planned on showing you the capital,” Jade explained, “and this is the only chance you’ll get to see it for a while.”

“Rutile-san said something similar, that something special is in the capital. What actually is it?”

“You should go and see for yourself. I honestly wanted to take you, but work has piled up. I’ll feel assured with Rutile accompanying you, though. She’s in your hands, Rutile,” Jade called toward the back of his office where Rutile stood.

“As you command, sire,” she replied, a sweet smile on her face.



Ruri’s hair and eye color would instantly clue people in that she was a Beloved, so she put on her brown wig to disguise herself. When she was all set, she stepped out of her room, where she found Rutile dressed in men’s clothing. Her androgynous features only drew out her attractiveness even more. Simply put, she looked absolutely stunning.

Rutile, who’d been waiting for Ruri in the hallway the entire time, was getting some very passionate stares from everyone around her, mostly from the women of the castle, but Ruri could understand where they were coming from. After all, she couldn’t help but be captivated as well.

“Are you all ready, Ruri?” Rutile asked.

“Y-Yes!”

“Then shall we be off?”

“Yes!” Ruri yelped, silently apologizing for the tingly sensation she’d felt in her heart.

She went to follow after Rutile, but then she felt a very strong gaze fixed upon her, and she stopped in her tracks. Turning around, she saw Kotaro, staring back at her intently.

“I’d like to go too...”

She’d instructed Kotaro to stay at the castle this time around since people would instantly recognize her if she ventured into town with him and his massive body. For that same reason, she was only bringing Rin, whom she could fit into her pocket.

Ruri reached out and petted Kotaro’s head apologetically. “Sorry, Kotaro. I’d stand out too much if I brought you.”

“But what if something happens to you?” said her other overprotective guardian.

“Rin will be with me, so I’ll be fine. Rutile-san is coming too. Isn’t that right, Rin?”

“Yes, yes. Leave Ruri to me,” Rin said as she fluttered around Kotaro before settling in Ruri’s breast pocket.

“Okay, I’ll be back soon,” Ruri assured him. “I’ll bring you back something nice from the city.”

“Hmph...”

Leaving the cranky Kotaro behind, Ruri tried to catch up with Rutile, but this time, a different voice stopped her.

“Oh, my dear sweet Ruri~! Where are you going, all disguised like that?” asked Gibeon, who was passing by, apparently running an errand for Euclase.

“I’m going to the capital,” she replied.

“Huh? Oh wow, that sounds like fun. I’ll come with you!”

“Aren’t you working?” She glanced at the large stack of documents in his hands.

“No problemo! A date with you is *way* more important!” Gibeon said before flinging his papers into his pocket space.

“Don’t come crying to me if Euclase-san chews you out for this later.”

No, not *if*. Euclase was definitely going to chew Gibeon out and perhaps even give him a hard knock on the noggin.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. C’mon, let’s go!” Gibeon exclaimed, casually wrapping his arm around Ruri’s shoulder.

Rin wasted no time in slapping his hand away. “*Don’t you dare touch Ruri like you’re all buddy-buddy. I still haven’t forgiven you for pointing a weapon at her.*”

Ruri assumed that Rin was talking about the sacred beast kidnapping incident. Gibeon had taken Ruri hostage and pointed a sword at her. Ruri hadn’t been afraid because she knew that Kotaro had his barrier around her, so she’d been nonplussed about the whole ordeal. However, now that Rin mentioned it, Ruri realized that Gibeon had been receiving some stern glares from not only Rin, but Kotaro and the other spirits as well. Ruri was sure they were all still fuming over Gibeon’s actions, just like Rin.

“Wait, wait, *I’m* the one who had it the roughest! You saw how the Spirit of Light hit me, right?! I mean, like, what the heck is that paper fan made out of? It hurt like crazy. So much so that I passed out!”

“*That was your just deserts,*” Rin remarked.

“Okay, okay. Let’s stop the bickering and get going, all right?” Ruri interjected, putting Rin in her pocket and rushing off to Rutile, who was standing a short distance away.

The capital city was more lively than normal, bustling as if some sort of festival were taking place.

“I feel like there are more tourists here than usual,” Gibeon said.

It wasn’t just a feeling; it was a fact. There was indeed a large number of people who seemed to be sightseers from different lands.

“It’s not the time of year for festivals, though, so what is going on here?” Ruri asked.

Rutile had stated that something special was happening in the capital, but she had yet to actually tell Ruri what it was.

“Aah, could it be that the fourier are coming?” guessed Gibeon.

“Fourier?” repeated Ruri.

Gibeon seemed to have a hunch as to what was going on, but Ruri had positively no idea what he was talking about. She looked at Rutile, but Rutile was simply smiling, amused by the situation.

“I was told that you were not of this world,” Rutile said, “and now I see that must be true, especially if you don’t know about fourier.”

“Huh? You *don’t* know what a fourier is?” Gibeon asked, his face one of disbelief.

“Are they that famous?” Ruri inquired. It almost seemed as if everyone but her knew who or what this “fourier” was.

“Well then, allow me to fill you in—up close and personal,” Gibeon murmured, grabbing Ruri’s hand.

Ruri, baffled by the fact that he still hadn’t learned his lesson, gave him a wry grin.

From the side, Rutile stuck out her foot and kicked Gibeon hard across the shin.

“Ngh!” Gibeon crumpled to the ground with tears in his eyes, unable to speak. He looked up at Rutile with an expression that seemed to ask what the big idea was, but Rutile simply smiled as if nothing had ever happened.

Rutile stated, “I am under orders from His Majesty to exterminate any *bugs* I find.”

“Bugs?!” repeated Gibeon.

“Looks like Jade-sama is finally calling you a bug...” Ruri remarked.

“That’s so mean, Mr. Dragon King!” Gibeon covered his face with his hands

and whined, but even Ruri could tell that it was just crocodile tears.

“Anyway, that aside, what’s this ‘fourier’?” Ruri asked.

“‘That stuff aside’? You’re not going to ask if I’m all right after I just took a dragonkin kick to the leg?! Your precious part-time lover just got his shin obliterated, and *that’s* your response?”

“Yeah, yeah. If you’re making that much of a ruckus, then you’re just fine. Now, forget that and tell me about fourier.”

Rutile stepped in to explain in place of Gibeon, who wasn’t giving a straight answer at all. “A fourier is the magic beast you see adorning the area.”

“Magic beast?” Ruri looked at the shops around them and saw lines of merchandise depicting a light-blue whale. She had been wondering what that was about for a while now. It wasn’t just one or two places either; every shop and stall were selling light-blue-whale goods. Whale cookies, whale cakes, whale plush dolls, whale-embroidered bags—the whole place was filled with whales.

“Do you mean that light-blue whale?” Ruri asked.

“Whale? I don’t know what that is, but that light-blue creature is indeed a fourier,” replied Rutile.

“Is it going through some sort of boom in popularity?”

“I don’t know if you would call it a ‘boom,’ but fourier will be arriving in the capital soon.”

Ruri cocked her head in confusion.

“Fourier travel around the world and visit the Nation of the Dragon King’s capital once every fifty years,” Rutile explained. “And since year fifty is almost upon us, tourists are here from foreign lands to catch a glimpse of the fourier, which explains the crowds.”

“Wow, neat. Will I be able to see it too?” Ruri wondered.

“Yes. In fact, I believe you can see it from your special seat up in Sector One of the castle.”

“But isn’t that too far away?”

Sector One sat above the clouds, so Ruri was doubtful as to whether she would be able to see the whales—the fourier—swimming in the ocean from so high up, but Rutile assured her it would be “just fine.” Ruri decided to believe her. Besides, it wasn’t as if she could miss the ocean from Sector One, and if she found it too hard to see, she could always get closer by riding on Kotaro.

Many of the shops were selling fourier goods exclusively during this time, so Ruri picked out some gifts for Kotaro and Jade since neither could make it out. Ruri sent a plush fourier doll that was big enough to ride on to Lydia inside the pocket space. She was sure that Lydia would be pleased, because she knew that the Spirit of Time was a huge fan of cute things.

The doll was so fluffy and comfortable that Ruri even bought one for herself. Her lips naturally spread into a grin as she thought of using it as a big, comfy body pillow, but Ruri did wonder if Jade would get jealous if she cuddled it too much. Kotaro was proud that Ruri always petted his soft fur, so he might get jealous too if he saw her always hugging a doll instead of him. Ruri decided to buy Kotaro a big pack of fourier-shaped cookies instead.

Because Jade hadn’t let her leave his side ever since getting married, Ruri hadn’t been able to visit the capital, so she wanted to take this chance to enjoy a little shopping. As she bought everything and anything that caught her fancy, she spotted a familiar face in the crowd. It was the woman who was managing the hot spring facility that Ruri had built recently. She was selling candy labeled as ‘fourier candy’ at a stall, but they were just regular candies. Nothing about them screamed fourier. If she was here hawking merchandise, then who was running the facility?

“Amarna-san,” Ruri called to her.

“Well, well, if it isn’t you, Lady Belo— I mean, Lady Ruri!” Amarna replied, noticing Ruri’s disguise and catching herself before she spilled the beans.

Although thankful that she was so perceptive, Ruri still wondered what she was doing in the city. “You’re vending here? I thought I left the hot spring facility in your care, Amarna-san. Should you be abandoning it like this?”

“Oh, you needn’t worry about that!” Amarna exclaimed. “The workers are

taking care of the facility. They are working so hard that no one would dare make fun of them for being kids from the slums anymore!”

“That’s very encouraging,” Ruri said. She felt guilty for leaving the facility that she’d built herself solely in the care of others, but she was also relieved that the children from the slums were growing up to be more and more reliable.

“And now, since I can safely leave the facility to my employees, I’m taking the opportunity to make a *killing* in my main business! Tee hee hee hee!” Amarna said with a giggle, her eyes filled with greed. However, when she glanced behind Ruri where Gibeon was standing, her eyes went wide. Gibeon’s eyes bulged in a similar fashion, and the two of them stood with their mouths agape as if they’d seen a ghost.

“Y-You’re *Amarnaaa!*” Gibeon cried.

“Gibeon!” Amarna growled with just as much energy.

They pointed at each other in shock as Ruri wondered what she was witnessing.

“Do you two know each other?” she asked.

There was a short pause, then Amarna flashed a happy saleswoman smile as if nothing had happened. “Oh, heavens no. I have no idea who this cheeky little brat is!”

“Yeah, and I don’t know who this money-grubbing wench is either!” Gibeon remarked.

“Uh, but you called each other by name just a second ago. Plus, you both described the other’s personality to a tee,” Ruri pointed out. Saying each other’s names as clear as day only to be total strangers was too much of a stretch.

“If I said that I don’t know him, then I don’t! Is that clear?!” Amarna barked.

Ruri winced from the intense grip Amarna had on her arm. “Y-Yes,” she stuttered, nodding in agreement. If she hadn’t done so, Amarna probably would have crushed her shoulder to dust. It appeared that the two were familiar with one another, but not on the best of terms.

“Okay now, you’re interrupting business, so I humbly ask you to hang around someplace else, Lady Ruri!” Amarna insisted.

Although it was extremely rude to tell a Beloved that they were interrupting anything, Gibeon quickly put his arm around Ruri’s shoulder and started to lead her to a different shop. “Let’s not stick around *here*. They’re selling way cooler things over there, so let’s check it out,” Gibeon suggested, though it sounded as if his true intention was to get away as soon as possible.

Gibeon quickly looked back at Amarna with a sour expression, and sparks flew between the two. After they died down, Gibeon went right back to his usual goofball demeanor. He seemed adamant about avoiding the subject, so Ruri held her tongue and made her way to her mother’s shop. By the time they all arrived, Gibeon was acting as if he’d forgotten about what had happened.

Ruri held off on pursuing the matter and entered the shop. Once she stepped through the door, she spotted Heat, who was clad in a light-blue-whale graphic t-shirt and hitting on a female patron.

“Heat-sama, what are you doing?” Ruri inquired.

“Oh, it’s the brat. You’re here, eh? You can see what I’m doing, can’t you? I’m servicing a customer.”

Normally, an employee didn’t tenderly hold the customer’s hand when offering service. Ruri shot Heat a disappointed look; he hadn’t changed one bit even after leaving the castle. She then tried to find Heat’s chaperone, Riccia, but she was nowhere to be found.

“Heat-sama, where’s my mom?” Ruri asked, turning around only to find that Heat was now holding Rutile’s hand instead of the woman’s from before. She couldn’t help but be impressed by how fast he worked.

“What might your name be, O beautiful one?”

“My name is Rutile. And yours?”

“Rutile, is it? What an exquisitely beautiful name. What would you say to a date with me?”

“Sorry, I’m guarding Ruri at the moment.”

“You can leave that little brat behind. People may call her a Beloved, but she is nothing more than a pug-nosed kid. She is not worthy to receive your protection, O beautiful one.”

Rutile knit her brow. “I do not approve of you speaking of an esteemed Beloved in such a manner,” she said, harshly warning Heat, but he just let the advice go in one ear and out the other.

“You’re wasting your breath, Rutile-san. Heat-sama is the supreme-level Spirit of Fire, so he won’t listen to any person’s orders,” Ruri explained. The only one who Heat would listen to was Riccia.

Rutile looked back at Heat in shock. “I had heard that a large congregation of supreme-level spirits had come to the kingdom while I was away, but I did not expect you to be one of them. A thousand apologies for my insolence,” Rutile said, offering him a polite apology.

Heat, flattered by her display of humility, brashly replied, “Heh heh heh. No worries. I wouldn’t make allowances for the brat, but I will for you, O beautiful one.”

“Wait, how come I’m excluded?!” Ruri cried.

“Shut up, brat,” Heat replied. “That’s the kind of treatment a kid like you deserves.”

“That doesn’t make any sense and you know it.”

It wasn’t the first time that Heat had been rude to Ruri, but it was still a mystery as to why he discriminated against her so much. Maybe he should take note of the best and most loyal boy—Kotaro. Heat would probably learn a little kindness if he did.

“Leave that brat behind and come on a date with me. Right this instant,” Heat insisted.

“But, I can’t just...” Rutile trailed off.

“Heat-sama, quit bothering Rutile-san!” Ruri ordered.

“Silence. I’m in the middle of an important conversation, so butt out.”

“Oh my. And exactly *how* important is this conversation that you can just skip

work?” Riccia said with a smile, emerging from the back room of the shop.

The second Heat heard Riccia’s voice, his body shot up straight and he started quivering. His dignity as a supreme-level spirit faded away in an instant.

“Heat-chan. You need to mind the store like a good employee should, don’t you?” Riccia cooed.

“Eep!” Heat yelped and quickly let go of Rutile’s hand.

Riccia finally turned her attention to her daughter. “Welcome, Ruri. I see you have a very cute and very suave companion with you today. I think the ‘beauty in men’s clothing’ angle is divine. It’s stirring up my creativity.”

“This is my bodyguard, Rutile-san. She is also Finn-san’s fiancée.”

“Oh my, Finn-san’s? He is a lucky man, indeed.”

Ruri agreed vehemently with her mother. She’d never expected Finn to have such a gorgeous fiancée.

“I noticed Gibeon-kun came here,” Riccia said, “but was he with you, Ruri? Would you mind if I borrowed him?”

“Oh, come to think of it, where is Gibeon?” Ruri asked, realizing that he had been awfully quiet for a while. She then realized that Gibeon had vanished.

A pathetic-sounding voice came wafting from the back. “Ruuuriiii~!” Out came Gibeon, wearing a shirt and pants adorned with light-blue whales—fourier—printed on them. Heat was also wearing fourier apparel, but his was more stylish and mature—an outfit that no grown man would be embarrassed to be seen in. The outfit Gibeon was wearing, on the other hand, had fourier printed on it in a more in-your-face, cutesy pattern, and it looked exactly like something children would wear.

“I hate thiiis!” Gibeon bellowed, desperate to take off the kiddy outfit.

“If you take it off, you’re going to get punished,” Riccia threatened.

Her words took effect immediately, and Gibeon simmered down, holding back his tears. He looked at Ruri, silently asking for help, but Ruri promptly ignored him. Being Riccia’s daughter, Ruri knew better than anyone that you did *not* want to disobey her mother.

“He looks so adorable now, doesn’t he? I want to have Gibeon-kun help me with promotion, so leave him here, will you?”

“Master, heeelp!” Gibeon screamed, clinging to Heat as tears rolled from his eyes, but it was an effort made in vain because Heat couldn’t disobey Riccia either.

“Well? Can I?” Riccia asked.

“Sure, I don’t mind,” Ruri answered.

“You’re terrible, Ruri! You’re going to abandon *me*?! Your *lover*?!” Gibeon clung to her and pleaded that she change her mind but to no avail.

Ruri shot the young man a neutral expression, patted him on the shoulder, and told him, “Good luck.”

Leaving Gibeon in the throes of despair, Ruri exited the store and went on to greatly enjoy her stroll around town.

Chapter 3: The Visitors

After having her fill of shopping in the capital, Ruri returned to the castle. She'd tuckered herself out from all of the walking, so she retired early and fell into such a sound sleep that she didn't even notice Jade climb into bed with her.

The next morning, she was nudged awake.

"Mngh..." Ruri opened her eyes, fighting off the drowsiness, and saw Jade sitting beside her with his back to the morning sun. He gently stroked her hair, leaned down, and planted a soft kiss on her lips. That wasn't enough to wake Ruri from her daze, though.

"What is it, Jade-sama? Aren't you up earlier than usual?" Ruri mumbled drowsily, attempting to close her eyes.

Jade, however, picked her up without warning and carried her over to the balcony. The morning sun shone mercilessly upon her, telling her to wake up. A cluster of tiny giggles erupted around her. Ruri silently pleaded for more sleep and tried to doze off into a blissful slumber, but the spirits weren't allowing that to happen.

"Looks like Ruri is sleepy."

"Wake up, Ruri!"

"You're in for a surprise."

"Yeah, a big surprise!"

Goaded by the tiny voices, Ruri reluctantly opened her eyes...and saw a large school of whales. For a moment, Ruri thought that she was still dreaming, and it only made sense why she would. After all, there was a school of light-blue whales, all of which were bigger than Jade in his dragon form, swimming through the clouds. The gigantic whales almost covered the entire sky over the capital as they made their airborne journey.

“Wait, huh? What? Am I dreaming?” Ruri questioned, snapping awake. Her eyes were as big as saucers, while Jade looked on with a pleasant smile on his face.

“Uh, Jade-sama? What are those?” Ruri asked.

“You enjoyed the sights of the capital yesterday, didn’t you? Those are the fourier,” Jade explained.

“But they’re *flying in the sky*. They’re not swimming in the ocean.”

“Hm? Fourier are flying magic beasts. They actually hate water.”

“Those aren’t like the whales that I know...”



Everyone had said from the start that they were magic beasts, so it was Ruri's incorrect assumption that fourier were sea creatures. Besides, seeing as how even the clone body that Rin was using could fly, it was logical to think that there would be flying whales as well. This was a fantasy world where beings such as the dragonkin existed, after all.

Although Ruri was a little afraid of the sheer size of the creatures, the fourier looked like they were just casually flying through the sky.

"Do fourier attack people? Aren't they magic beasts?"

"They are indeed magic beasts, but they are very docile creatures. They live by continuously flying through the sky, taking in airborne mana. Since they're large and travel in schools, someone seeing them for the first time might find them a tad frightening, but they are very harmless, so tourists come in droves to see them. It has been said since the times of old that you gain a little bit of happiness by seeing a fourier."

"Oh wow. So it's sort of like a good luck animal," Ruri said. She understood why all of the townspeople wanted to sell fourier goods now. It might have been superstition, but it seemed that everyone wanted a little piece of happiness.

After she and Jade watched them for a while, the fourier started to slowly head in the direction of the sea.

"They're gone now," Ruri lamented.

"That was the first school," Jade said. "They tend to travel by splitting into two or three waves, so you'll be able to see more after this. Should I transform into my dragon form so we can get a closer look the next time they come?"

"Are you sure about that?"

"Of course. Like I said before, they are docile. They won't attack you for just flying next to them, so don't worry."

"Do they sometimes attack?"

"If a foolish flying demi-human tries to mess with the fourier, the fourier will sometimes hit them with their fins or tackle them, but that's rightfully

deserved.”

“Huh? Wouldn’t that be really *bad*?” Ruri asked, realizing that a tackle from a body that massive would turn one into a pancake. The impact would probably be greater than getting hit by a big rig at top speed. To make matters worse, it would be a midair collision, so chances were that one would fall to their death.

“The fools in question are usually young dragonkin, so they don’t die as a result,” Jade answered.

“Aah, that’s fine, then,” Ruri said in relief.

Dragonkin were extremely tough and sturdy. They would just laugh off a tackle, even if it were from a large, flying whale. As for why they would mess with good luck animals in the first place, that was anyone’s guess. Regardless, fourier were strong enough to send a sturdy dragonkin flying, so while they were docile creatures, it did not mean they were weak.

As Ruri watched the fourier shrink into the distance, she silently prayed for happiness to descend upon them. What came after, however, was not a tiny piece of happiness, but a tiny storm instead.



It was the day after the second wave of fourier had passed. The school had come on the night of a beautiful full moon. As Jade had promised, Ruri had enjoyed a nighttime stroll through the skies with the fourier while riding atop Jade’s dragon back.

The sight of fourier swimming in the sky altogether, basking in the soft moonlight, was so whimsical that it touched Ruri to her core. Just thinking back on it made her giddy; she regretted not taking any photos during the ride. The fourier were scheduled to come one after the other for the next week or so, so Ruri solemnly vowed that she would take some pictures during the next wave.

The following day, Ruri was having tea in Jade’s office with Kotaro and Rin while Jade worked. Rutile wasn’t there as she had the day off. She was apparently going on a date with Finn in the capital. Unlike the male clothing that she’d worn when she went out with Ruri, she’d left wearing a pretty dress. Euclase had coordinated her outfit, and Ruri couldn’t help but be impressed by

the excellent choice that highlighted Rutile's great feminine charm.

It seemed that Rutile and Euclase were the best of friends. Once Euclase found out that Rutile was going to go out in a plain outfit, they'd gone right to work gussying her up. Finn was surely going to swoon at the sight of Rutile.

While Ruri wanted to snoop on their date out of curiosity, she pulled back the reins. Rutile had been away in the Imperial Nation for so long, and this was the first time she was going out with Finn in several years. It would have been a shame to butt in during their all-too-important date.

Funnily enough, Ewan, the person most likely to butt in, was buried under so much work from Jade that he *couldn't* bug them. Ruri applauded Jade for his handiwork.

Since her bodyguard was away, Ruri remained in the castle by Jade's side. Not that she really needed to worry, considering that Kotaro and the other spirits were still by her side, but she did so nonetheless.

A knock came at the door, and everyone stopped what they were doing.

"Enter," Jade called.

A soldier walked into the office with an extremely puzzled expression.

"What's the matter?" asked Jade.

"Well, a young girl claiming to be a Beloved has come to the castle, and I've come here seeking your judgment, Your Majesty."

"A Beloved?" Jade questioned.

"Indeed, that is what she said. It also seems she has brought along several water spirits and a contracted high-level spirit as well. It seemed like a very poor decision to send her away, so..."

Jade's eyes widened in surprise as he shot a look at Claus, who was also in the room. Claus wriggled his eyebrows, perplexed.

"Did they only bring water spirits with them?" Jade asked.

"It seems so. What should we do, sire?"

"Yes, let's see... I suppose there's no way to make a call unless I meet them."

“Yes, true,” Claus said, agreeing with Jade. “We must be wise in how we deal with this person in case they are a bona fide Beloved.”

Slightly curious, Ruri raised her hand and asked, “I have a question, Jade-sama! How can you tell whether someone is a Beloved or not?” Ruri had accepted the fact that she was a Beloved because everyone else had said so, but she still didn’t quite understand the qualifying standards to be one.

“That’s a seemingly simple yet slightly difficult question,” Jade replied. “Only a certain number are beloved by the spirits. Let’s take Joshua for example. Joshua is beloved by the wind spirits and sometimes touts a few around him.”

“But Joshua isn’t a Beloved, right?”

“Right. The number of spirits he has with him is clearly not the same as a Beloved. Plus, a Beloved is favored by multiple spirits, regardless of the elements, so Joshua, who only has wind spirits with him, isn’t a Beloved. You and Celestine have all sorts of spirits attending you, don’t you?”

“I see. Good point.”

Ruri looked around her. She recalled that her mother and grandfather also had a large entourage of spirits around them at all times—water, wind, fire, all kinds.

“The girl who has come here only has water spirits with her, so there’s a high chance that she isn’t a Beloved, but the fact that she’s contracted a high-level spirit makes me curious,” Jade said, rising from his chair.

“Are you going to go see her?” Ruri asked.

“Yes. Even if she isn’t a Beloved, I can’t neglect someone contracted with a high-level spirit, especially if they’re introducing themselves as a Beloved,” Jade explained.

“Then I’ll come with you.”

Jade instantly furrowed his brow and replied, “You know that meeting with any Beloved not from the Four Nations is strictly forbidden, don’t you? You can’t.”

“But you just said that you think it’s unlikely that this girl is a Beloved,” Ruri

protested.

“But there’s always an off chance that she *is*.”

Ruri pouted, disappointed, before she was hit with an idea. She stood up and slipped the bracelet from her pocket onto her wrist. In the blink of an eye, Ruri took on her white cat form and nuzzled against Jade’s leg. She then looked up at him with her cute little doe eyes.

Jade flinched. “Urk!”

“Meooow.”

Now Jade was trembling—badly. He was as big of a pushover as always; he caved immediately. “Y-You’re just going to stay still and listen, okay?”

Claus, who was watching this display, simply shook his head and sighed.

Jade then picked Ruri up in his arms and walked over to the room where the young girl awaited him. Kotaro and Rin also came along, following Ruri. They were ready to go without being asked, as Jade had entreated them to be present since the other party had a high-level spirit with them.

Because this girl’s spirits were water spirits, Rin found herself unusually motivated because she was the supreme-level Spirit of Water.

“If they try to pull anything on you, I’ll make sure to scare them off, Ruri,” Rin said reassuringly.

Spirits had a strict hierarchy. They couldn’t disobey the orders of those higher than themselves. Even if one were a Beloved, as long as they hadn’t subjugated the spirit, they could only give requests, not orders.

Because a supreme-level spirit’s orders took precedence over the requests of a contract-bearer, and because Ruri had subjugated a supreme-level spirit like Rin, even if the other person were a Beloved or held a contract, they couldn’t defy Ruri. Hearing this explanation, Ruri felt both confident and terrified. It was a life hack in the most literal sense.

Once they entered the room, a girl in her late teens sprung up from her chair, looked at Jade’s face, and blushed. Ruri completely understood how she felt, but she was also somewhat conflicted as Jade’s wife.

“Are you the one who claims to be a Beloved?” Jade asked.

“Yes! That’s right, sir. My name is Sango Suzuki!”

The girl had dark hair and dark eyes. These features were very familiar to Ruri, but the color combination was rare in this world. Just as that thought crossed Ruri’s mind, she picked up on the name as well.

“*Suzuki?*” That name had an unusual ring to it in this world, and it hit Ruri with a wave of nostalgia.

“Oh, Suzuki is my last name. Sango is my first. The people in this world don’t really have last names, right? So, please, just call me ‘Sango.’”

The girl’s words startled Ruri. Had she just said “this world”? Nevertheless, Ruri knew that she couldn’t just jump to conclusions, so she sat still in Jade’s arms instead.

“You said that you are a Beloved, but are you certain of that?” questioned Jade.

“Yes, I believe that I am. No, I am *certain* of it! I mean, after all, you call people favored by the spirits ‘Beloveds’ in this world, correct? That is what the villagers all said. I’ve made friends with a lot of spirits, so I’m positive that I am one. I had wondered what would happen to me when I came to the otherworld, but I never thought I’d be someone so special. I was chosen and summoned here. I’m just like the protagonist in a light novel,” Sango euphorically explained.

Ruri couldn’t contain herself as she sat listening.

“Meow! Meow! Meow!” Ruri screamed, slapping her paw against Jade’s arm.

“Ruri?” asked Jade.

“Oh my, what a cute kitty,” Sango exclaimed. “Is that your pet, sir?”

Ruri jumped out of Jade’s arms, pulled on the cuff of his pants with her teeth, and led him out of the room.

“What’s the matter, Ruri?” he asked.

“*Jade-sama, doesn’t it seem that girl is from the same world as me?*”

“Yes, now that you mention it, she did say ‘this world,’ among other strange things.”

Words like “light novel” and “otherworld” were terms from Ruri’s world, and her name had an all too familiar structure.

“Would you mind asking her about that? You can do it after you find out whether or not she’s a Beloved.”

“Okay, I will.”

Jade returned to the room and quickly got to the heart of the matter. “I heard that you had a spirit entourage. Is this all of them?”

“Yes, sir.”

Sango had three lower-level spirits around her, all water spirits. Considering the number of spirits Ruri had around her on a normal basis, three was a piddling amount. Be that as it may, something other than the lower-level spirits was with Sango—a small squirrel on her shoulder.

Rin approached the squirrel.

“Wah, what is that?! A clione is flying! And it’s *huge*!” Sango interjected.

Her saying the word “clione” upon seeing Rin was pretty much like her saying that she was a human from planet Earth. The people of this world didn’t call Rin a clione when they saw her.

Rin stared intently at the squirrel, and the squirrel gave a little bow—a gesture unthinkable for a regular animal.

“Hmm, so this is the water spirit you spoke of. This is indeed a high-level spirit. Of course, they pale in comparison to me,” Rin boasted as she returned to Ruri’s side.

“The clione *talked*! Is that a spirit as well, by any chance?” Sango asked.

Jade disregarded her shock and asked Rin, “Do you not think she is a Beloved?”

“Oh, absolutely not. She’s just a regular human who fell into the favor of a high-level spirit, then a few lower-level spirits followed suit. It’d be preposterous

to say that she's a Beloved like Ruri."

Jade nodded, not at all surprised by Rin's blunt disavowal. He then turned back to Sango and declared, "I'm sorry, but I cannot recognize you as a Beloved."

"Huh?! How come?!" Sango asked, displeased with the decision. "A Beloved is someone beloved by the spirits, right? Look at how many spirits I have with me. I even have a contract with one of them."

"While you do appear to have contracted a higher-level spirit, that does not mean that you are a Beloved. Also, you only have water spirits with you."

"Yeah? *And?!"*

"There is no small number of people favored by spirits of a certain element, even within the confines of this very castle. Water spirits seem to favor you, but that's all. Hardly what you would call a Beloved."

"Whaa?!"

"But all of that aside, I'd like to ask you one question. Are you not a person of this world?" Jade inquired, finally addressing the question on everyone's minds.

Sango answered in a flat, matter-of-fact manner. "Yeah, I am. I used to live in a place called 'Japan,' but on my way home from school, I found myself sleeping in the middle of a remote village. I tried to find my way back home, but nothing I said was meshing with any of the villagers. They said I was in a place that I never heard of before called the Nation of the Dragon King. That's when I instantly realized that I'd been transported to another world like in all those novels!"

Sango's eyes were sparkling.

"Plus, as my hype levels shot through the roof once I found out magic existed here, I gave a can of cola I brought with me to this little guy I found at the village's spring. When I did, they asked me to make a contract, and I agreed despite not knowing any better. When I did, the villagers who'd been giving me the cold shoulder suddenly started being kind to me. That's when I heard about Beloveds."

“Now I see,” Jade said, looking down at Ruri as she looked up at him.

They both understood what was going on. This girl was from Ruri’s world after all. And in a stroke of sheer coincidence, she was also Japanese. It wasn’t often that an entrance was opened to allow people to come here, but to be caught in the middle of it was just bad luck. Sango didn’t seem to be lamenting her current predicament all too much, though.

“Say, am I really not a Beloved?” she asked.

“I’m afraid not,” Jade replied.

“Wha? That just *can’t* be right. I’m not getting anywhere talking to you, so bring me someone higher up.”

“I am the king of this nation. While I hate to brag, I am the most important person in the land.”

“Huh? You are?!”

Ruri couldn’t blame Sango for questioning that. Jade looked to be in his twenties, far too young to be the ruler of an entire kingdom. The truth was that he was over a hundred years old, but Sango would have no way of knowing that since she wasn’t from this world.

“Yes, I am, but if you aren’t a Beloved, then our conversation is over. I would tell you to give up and go home, but...you have no home here, do you?”

“I don’t... Of course I don’t,” Sango murmured in a dejected tone.

It was only natural that she had no place to call home. After all, she could never go back to the place she used to call home ever again.

Ruri had been in the exact same boat. Fortunately for her, her family had come to this world, so she wasn’t all by herself. Even so, she could still somewhat understand how Sango felt, so she tugged at Jade’s sleeve.

Jade looked down and gently petted her head as if to tell her that he knew what she was trying to communicate. He then turned to Sango and said, “I can’t bring you into this castle as a Beloved, but the fact that the spirits care for you and that you made a contract with a higher-level spirit might prove useful in the future. So I’ll propose to you this: will you work as a maid for this castle?”

Sango paused for a moment to process Jade's suggestion, but once she did, her eyes lit up, and she repeatedly nodded her head.

"If you work here," Jade continued, "I guarantee you clothing and shelter. I may even ask you to utilize your contracted spirit's power from time to time. Is that okay?"

"Y-Yes, it's fine!"

"If you do not work diligently, then I will show no mercy and kick you out. Please keep that in mind."

"Thank you very much," Sango said with a deep bow. Jade nodded one more time and then walked out of the room with Ruri in his arms.

"Was that good enough, Ruri?"

"*Yes, thank you,*" Ruri said and kissed him on the forehead. He looked embarrassed because she was in cat form, but it was likely a very welcome reward for a cat lover like Jade.

Chapter 4: The Girl Named Sango

Sango, the girl from the other world, started working at the castle per Jade's suggestion. Honestly, some of the aides found her proclaiming to be a Beloved problematic; to most nations in this world, Beloveds were very special beings. Because Sango came from a different world and most likely just had her head in the clouds, Jade and his aides decided to keep an eye on her. On the off chance that she caused problems, she would be sent to Idocrase just like Asahi had been.

Unlike Asahi, however, Sango had a contract with a high-level water spirit, so the consensus was that Rin should watch her if possible, since Rin was a supreme-level Spirit of Water. Even if Sango's spirits caused problems on Sango's behalf, Rin would be able to stop them because she outranked all of them.

With all this in mind, Ruri decided to visit Sango and greet her formally. After all, Ruri knew how disconcerting it was to suddenly arrive in a foreign world. She also figured that it would be easier to talk to Sango seeing as how they were both from Japan.

Jade quickly pulled the reins on that idea, though. Sango had been doing her job without issue, but one of Sango's coworkers had reported to Jade that every word out of her mouth oozed with obsession and envy toward Beloveds. She'd been asking all sorts of questions about Beloveds—how they were treated, how they lived, how much money was spent on them, and what freedoms they were allowed. Each question was filled with her lament and desire to be a Beloved.

Of course, it made sense that Sango wanted to be special. Perhaps it was her way of escaping the unfair reality of being brought to a different world. Who could blame her for thinking that she'd come here for some special reason or mission, like the protagonist in a grand story? Nevertheless, reality was a cruel mistress.

Both Ruri and Sango had come to this world for no reason other than a stroke

of bad luck. Fortunately for Ruri, she could now say that she was happy to be in this world, but based on Sango's accounts, Sango had only been in this world for a few months. It would take more time for her to accept the way of life here.

Due to Sango's constant talk of Beloveds, the decision was made to discourage her interest in them. In order to do so, and to ensure that her interest wasn't stimulated in any way, Jade asked Ruri to avoid seeing her. Euclase and Claus joined in, emphasizing the point.

To keep Sango separate, they gave her duties in the sectors below Sector Five, outside of Ruri's main sphere of activity, as it would mitigate any chance meetings between the two. In addition to preventing any encounters, this separation would teach Sango the divide between her and Beloveds. Only special people of high ranking were allowed to go to the castle's upper sectors.

Truth be told, Ruri and Jade lived in Sector One and never thought of themselves as special in the slightest, but this was necessary to deal with someone so obsessed with having a special status as Sango was. Ruri didn't think of herself as a big deal, but if all of this was for Sango's own good, she had no choice but to comply and keep herself away.

One day, while Ruri was relaxing with the spirits, a knock came at her door.

"Yes, come on in!" Ruri called, her face buried in Kotaro's cuddly fur.

Much to Ruri's surprise, Rutile opened the door and unleashed scores of maids into the room, each of them with large boxes in their hands.

"Huh? What's going on?!" Ruri asked.

"A delivery for you, Lady Beloved," announced one of the maids with a charming smile.

"A delivery? From whom?"

"From His Majesty, milady."

"Jade-sama?"

Jade hadn't mentioned anything about this when she was with him earlier

that morning, so Ruri wondered what exactly it could be as the line of maids continued to flood in. The amount of boxes was enough to make the corner of her mouth twitch in alarm.

“Wait, wait, wait. How many are there?” she inquired.

“It seems that His Majesty got carried away and ordered a rather wide variety of things for you,” Rutile answered with an awkward grin. It was evident that even she took issue with the sheer size of the delivery.

“I can’t even imagine what he would send so much of in the first place,” Ruri said, opening one of the boxes to check the contents. Inside was a beautiful one-piece dress. “Wow, it’s so cute!” She opened another box and found a pair of shoes. Another box contained jewelry and other accessories to adorn Ruri’s body.

Among the sea of boxes that lined the walls of the room, there was one that was packaged much more neatly than the others. When Ruri opened it, she found a gorgeous lace dress with a matching pair of shoes and accessories.

“Whoa, this is so pretty,” Ruri said, “and pretty expensive.” The fact that her mind immediately jumped to the price meant that she hadn’t lost her commoner sensibilities. Nevertheless, although Ruri didn’t splurge in the lap of luxury despite her status as a Beloved, even she could tell that the dress was expensive just by the material alone.

Fearing even more surprises like this, Ruri opened up each box one after another, but the majority of them were clothes and jewelry that she could wear in an everyday setting—which made the extravagant dress stand out even more. Ruri hadn’t the slightest clue as to why Jade had sent her this boatload of gifts out of the blue.

“It isn’t my birthday yet,” Ruri muttered, wondering if Jade had mixed up the date. That was a possibility.

As she pondered over what to do with all of this stuff, the orchestrator in question, Jade, walked into the room. “I see the delivery has arrived.”

“Jade-sama, what in the world is all of this?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Presents for you, Ruri.”

“No, I understand that, but *why*? It’s not our anniversary or anything,” Ruri said, wondering if there was a special day that she wasn’t privy to, but nothing came to mind.

“They’re dresses for the party we’re having at the castle. Whenever you get dressed up for parties or events, you always consult Euclase instead of me, don’t you? That’s why I wanted you to pick from the dresses that I selected this time around,” Jade said, taking a tuft of Ruri’s platinum blonde hair and planting a gentle kiss on it. “Will you wear them for me?”

“O-Of course I will,” Ruri stammered, blushing and nodding. There was no way she could refuse after Jade hit her with his sensual, flirtatious gaze. That did raise a question, though. “There’s a party happening?”

“Weren’t you told?” Jade said, tilting his head.

“Not at all,” Ruri answered, shooting a look at Rutile and the maids, who proceeded to look at one another in turn. Apparently, they all thought that someone had explained the plans to her already.

“I just assumed that Rutile would inform you given that you went into town for the fourier visit,” Jade explained.

“My apologies, Your Majesty. I also thought that someone informed her,” Rutile replied, apologizing.

“No, I should have just told her to begin with,” Jade said, turning back to Ruri. “When the fourier visit, just like how the streets of the capital become festive, so does the castle as well. We throw a party with hopes that the symbols of happiness, the fourier, visit us once more.”

“Oh, I had no idea that was a thing,” Ruri said.

“Well, to be honest, it’s the normal drunken hijinks, only the fourier are used as a reason to partake in it. But it *is* a party, so it would be more fun for you if you dressed up, wouldn’t it?”

“I see, so that’s why you sent me so many gifts.”

“Indeed. I also ordered you some everyday clothes while I was at it. Euclase told me to spend a little more of the Beloved-allotted budget, not only to keep

the economy going, but your lifestyle is so basic that Euclase has chewed me out for setting a bad example for other nations.”

“Aha ha ha... Well, that’s easier said than done...”

Ruri had never been the type to splurge, and just like her time living in the woods with Chelsie, she was perfectly satisfied with the bare minimum. Considering that she rarely went out of the castle when she was dressed up, she had no need for expensive jewelry or beautiful dresses. And ever since she married Jade, her range of activity had shrunk even more, so she had fewer places to go out all gussied up. On the other hand, Euclase was likely worried that other nations would get the impression that the Nation of the Dragon King was undermining their Beloved if she was living so frugally.

Not even a superpower nation could control what a Beloved did, and some Beloveds would move if provided with better treatment. There was no fear of Ruri doing that, because she’d married Jade and intended to spend her dying days in the Nation of the Dragon King, but other nations felt differently. The number of nations that wanted a Beloved of their own was more than one could count on two hands. It wasn’t necessarily out of the question that some nations would try to solicit Ruri, saying that they had a sweeter deal for her.

Euclase definitely had a point; if they didn’t splurge on Ruri to a certain extent, it would send a bad message to the other nations. A Beloved-allotted budget was a necessary expense to show everyone that the nation took good care of their Beloved. Also, the tidings that the Nation of the Dragon King received from a Beloved’s presence well made up for the necessary expenses.

Euclase had once told Ruri that the nation’s domestic revenue had increased ever since she’d arrived and patted her on the head in high spirits. Being a chancellor meant paying attention to a lot of different details. Although Ruri wasn’t really doing anything, if her mere presence was beneficial to the nation, it made her happy.

“Well, buying this much should keep Euclase happy for a while,” Jade said.

“Yes, I’m sure. This is far too much, actually,” Ruri replied, looking around her gift-filled room with a wry grin.

“I picked these out because I thought they’d look good on you, so I’d love to

see you wear them. Especially the outfit I prepared for the party.”

“Yes, thank you. I can’t wait. They’re so pretty,” Ruri said, smiling in excitement. Jade’s lips curled into a smile as well, and he softly stroked Ruri’s cheek.

That was when someone apologetically called out to them in the midst of their affectionate display. “Your Majesty, pardon my intrusion.”

“Claus? What’s the matter?” asked Jade.

“A bit of a problem has arisen, sire,” Claus answered.

“That being?”

Claus signaled with his eyes to the maids in the room, who all bowed and filed out at once. Soon, the only people left were Ruri, Jade, Rutile, and Claus.

“What happened?” inquired Jade.

“Two people are here claiming to be the guardians of our new guest and demanding that we give her back.” explained Claus.

“New guest?” Jade repeated.

“The girl who came here saying that she was a Beloved. Her name is Sango, I believe?”

“Ooh, you mean the girl from the same world as me,” Ruri interjected. “Huh? I thought she said that she had no place to go. She has guardians? Despite being from another world?”

“Apparently so,” Claus said.

What did this even mean? Sango’s having guardians raised the question of whether she’d been honest about being from another world, but her story didn’t seem untrue at all. Then what could explain this?

Ruri quickly put on her bracelet, turned into a cat, and prodded Jade to pick her up. “*Jade-sama, I’m going to sit in on the talk.*”

Jade looked reluctant to comply, but he picked Ruri up in his arms nonetheless. They walked to the room where Sango’s guardians awaited them.

There was a man and a woman, both older than Ruri had expected. The man

was the chief of the village where Sango had stayed, and the woman was his wife. When Jade entered the room carrying Ruri, they both immediately knelt on the floor and pleaded, “Please, we beseech you. Give us back our daughter.”

From their phrasing, it almost seemed they thought Ruri and the others had kidnapped the girl. It left a bad taste in their mouths considering they’d set Sango up with a job out of the goodness of their hearts. Ruri and Jade’s expressions naturally became grim.

“What do you mean? I thought that girl wasn’t a resident of this world and she had no blood relatives here,” Jade said.

“W-Well...” the village chief stammered.

His wife, on the other hand, loudly proclaimed, “We’ve raised her as if she were our own child!”

“Y-Yes, that’s right!” the chief chimed in.

“She stated that she came here only a few months ago. And you say you *raised* her?” Jade calmly inquired.

The couple seemed to be scrambling to come up with a response.

“Also, she said she came here of her own free will. When we asked if she had a home, she said she didn’t, so would you care to explain that?”

“Oh...” The wife hesitated before saying, “You see, we got into a bit of an argument before she came here. Yes, she simply got upset and tried to run away from home. It’s common among youngsters.”

“Exactly!” the chief exclaimed.

Something about this was fishy. Sango had said that she’d stayed in the village but didn’t have any attachment for the villagers in the slightest. If she did, then she wouldn’t have answered that she had no place else to go. It felt as though there was a specific reason these two were so desperate to get Sango back.

Ruri looked up at Jade, as if asking what to do, and Jade turned toward the door.

“I’ll bring her in. I assume there are some issues you need to sort out here, so you three can talk it out among yourselves,” Jade said before leaving the room

and telling a nearby soldier to bring Sango.

“Are you certain you should let them see her? I personally feel something is amiss here,” Claus asked in concern.

Jade nodded. “Believe me, the feeling is mutual. That is why I want to leave the three of them alone and see what that couple’s true intentions are. The room next door is free, yes?”

“It is. Showing them into that room just in case was the right call, sire.”

Ruri cocked her head, perplexed and feeling out of the loop. The room next door was similar in construction to the one where the couple were waiting, except there was a random door between the two rooms. When they opened that door and walked in, they were able to secretly see inside of the adjacent room.

“Ooh, a hidden room.”

“Ruri, quiet,” Jade hushed.

“Oh, right. Sorry. Being quiet now.”

After a few moments of silence, Sango entered the room. She seemed surprised that the village chief and his wife had come.

“Why are you here?” Sango questioned.

“We came to get you,” said the chief.

“Now, come. We’re leaving,” said the wife, grabbing Sango’s arm.

Sango shook her off with a look of disgust on her face and snapped, “Don’t touch me!”

“Quit being selfish!” cried the chief. “Do you know what trouble you’ve caused our village?!”

“Excuse me? What do you mean *I’ve* caused?”

“Ever since you left the village with the Great Spirit of the Spring, our village’s spring has dried up! And it’s all because you took the Great Spirit with you.”

“This involves you, Chibi?” Sango asked the squirrel on her shoulder.

“Chibi? Don’t tell me that you’re talking about the Great Spirit!” the chief roared.

“I am. I named him. Cute, isn’t it?”

The color drained from the village chief’s face, and his mouth went agape, but Sango didn’t understand why. She’d given the spirit a name, which essentially meant that the spirit was now Sango’s subordinate. Judging by the fact that the spirit wasn’t asking Rin for help, it was clear that Sango hadn’t forcibly stuck a name on it.

As expected, both Ruri and Jade were stunned. Neither had suspected that Sango had subjugated the high-level spirit. Contracts were contracts, so they’d assumed that both parties were on equal footing, like how Ruri and Lydia were.

“Erm, so subjugating a spirit means that this Sango girl can give that spirit orders, right?” Ruri whispered to Rin, who was by her side. *“In that case, which of your orders would have priority, Rin? Yours or hers?”* If Sango was subjugating the spirit, then that meant she could actually issue orders, not just simple requests.

“It’s a bit tricky to say,” Rin answered. *“A low-level spirit would easily prioritize my orders seeing as how I am a supreme-level spirit, but high-level spirits tend to have bigger egos and may prioritize their contract-bearer instead. So I’d say it depends on how close they are with their contract-bearer.”*

“Ah, I see.”

Rin’s explanation helped Ruri understand, but if Sango had subjugated a high-level spirit, then the need to keep the girl away from Ruri was even greater. And from the annoyed look on Sango’s face, she was not too keen on leaving the castle.

“Anyway, I’m not leaving, so *don’t* show up here ever again,” Sango declared.

“I don’t care if *you* don’t come back, but return the Great Spirit to the spring!” screamed the chief.

“I’m the one who should be telling you to stop being selfish. Chibi tagged along with me of his own accord. Isn’t that right, Chibi?”

The squirrel nodded its head repeatedly, then nuzzled against Sango's cheek, as if to tell her that he wasn't going anywhere. From that display, it was clear that the spirit was fond of her.

"The Great Spirit has been protecting that village for hundreds of years. You can't just show up out of the blue and foul that up!" the chief yelled, red in the face.

Hearing the chief's tirade, both Rin and Kotaro muttered in unison, "*What a fool.*" The look in their eyes was positively frigid.

Jade had a similar look on his face. He put Ruri on Kotaro's back and silently walked out and to the room next door. He then glared sternly at the village chief and his wife, who were both puzzled by Jade's sudden entrance.

"I was listening to your conversation," Jade explained, "and I have decided that I will not be giving you two that girl."

"No way!" exclaimed the chief.

"The village will not be able to sustain itself if she does not come back. Please convince her to return, Your Majesty!" pleaded the chief's wife.

Jade looked at Sango and asked, "Do you want to go back to their village?"

Sango's answer was clear and succinct. "Absolutely *not*!"

"There you have it. If her decision is final, then I will keep her safe. She already works in this castle, making her one of my subjects. So long as she is under my wing, I cannot simply pretend she doesn't exist."

"I-In that case," the chief began, "could you please ask her to return the spirit back to its rightful place, at least?"

"Spirits decide where they go of their own volition. No person is allowed to meddle with that, not even the ruler of a great nation. Give up. Spirits are not subject to the will of man."

"This can't be..." The village chief dropped to his knees as his wife stood beside him, her face pale and lips trembling.

"This discussion is over," Jade stated. "You will now return to work."

"Y-Yes, sire," Sango replied, gazing at Jade like he was a hero who had just saved her life. The sight of Jade protecting her must have been very encouraging considering she was all alone in this world with no one to rely on.

"Hmm, Jade-sama is quite the lady-killer..." noted Ruri.

"Yes," Rin agreed. *"And I'm worried that might spark some drama that will put you in danger."*

"Agreed, I'll put another barrier over her just in case," said Kotaro.

Being the worrywarts that they were, Rin and Kotaro always put Ruri at the center of the universe.

"No, come on. You've got enough on me already," Ruri pointed out.

She was already wrapped in a barrier so sturdy that not even a dragonkin's attack could faze it. She wondered what there was to be so worried about; Kotaro and Rin were fretting about a normal human girl. That said, since Sango had subjugated a spirit, they might be worried that the spirit would try to harm Ruri.

Jade soon returned to the room, picked up Ruri, who was next to Claus, and said, "Claus, I want you to investigate the village where the girl was staying. If they cannot sustain livability there, then we will need to take action."

"Very well, sire."

It was hard to forgive the village chief and his wife for putting their own needs first, but Jade had an obligation as Dragon King to deal with matters happening within the confines of his kingdom. If the spring had dried up and hindered the villagers' way of life as the chief and his wife had said, he couldn't pretend the issue didn't exist. Being the Dragon King was a tough job.

"It would be nice if you could quit your kingly duties and we could go into seclusion somewhere alone, wouldn't it?" Ruri quipped.

"You can say that again," Jade agreed with a sigh.

Kotaro and Rin, however, were miffed about that comment.

"We wouldn't allow you to go anywhere alone. We'll be coming with you!" said Rin.

Kotaro cried, *“Of course! Wherever Ruri goes, we go!”*

“Aha ha ha. I’m sure the other spirits would come too. We’ll have to build a big house where we can live with everyone next to Chelsie-san’s house, then,” Ruri remarked.

Their life would be quite lively. Then again, Ruri knew that realistically that wouldn’t happen for a long time. Jade was still very young and in the prime of his life. It was unlikely that anyone would allow him to retire and sequester himself off at this point in time—*especially* not Agate and the other elders. It was just wishful thinking. Jade knew that all too well and was simply playing along with Ruri.

(But maybe one day...) Ruri thought, letting the idea drift through her head.



It was the day of the party Ruri had been told about, and the castle was suddenly abuzz. You could feel the excitement in the air. Ruri had begun preparing early, putting on the dress Jade had gifted her.

While Jade was indeed the one who’d picked out the dress, Ruri’s mother, Riccia, had designed and created it after Jade consulted her at her shop. It was no wonder that the logo printed on the dress’s box looked so familiar. If Riccia had helped with the design, then it made perfect sense why the dress was so catered to Ruri’s likings. Jade’s decision to consult with Riccia was a wise call.

After adorning herself with the beautiful hair ornaments and jewelry, Ruri went to meet Jade. He was also dressed differently than usual, clad in more formal attire. He wore an outfit that matched Ruri’s dress and even featured the same lace. It only took one look to decipher that these fashion choices were decisively Riccia’s and not Jade’s—fair play from the former model who had her own brand in the other world. Riccia understood the best way to exemplify Jade’s already beautiful features.

As she silently praised her mother, Ruri quickly whipped out her smartphone from her pocket space and snapped several pictures of Jade to capture the moment. That was how utterly devastating he looked today.

“You’re bound to get all of the ladies ogling you today. Ooh, I’m going to be

jealous,” Ruri said. She was proud as Jade’s wife, but a part of her didn’t want others to look at him.

“Heh heh, you’re jealous, are you?” Jade quipped.

“I mean, you look *too* good, Jade-sama.”

“You look exquisite yourself, Ruri. So much so that I want to lock you away and keep you from everyone’s eyes but my own,” Jade said, kissing Ruri on the cheek.

Ruri was positively demolished. She wondered how he could say any of that without a hint of embarrassment. Maybe all dragonkin men were like that, given that Quartz would occasionally say similar things to Seraphie. In fact, perhaps even Finn was like that when he was being serious. Ruri decided that she would ask Rutile in private whether that was the case.

Escorted by Jade, Ruri entered the main hall where the party was being held to see that the drunken festivities were already in full swing—even though the guests should have been waiting for their king to arrive. Jade could have given them a warning for it, but all the dragonkin were focused on the booze, so it would have gone in one ear and out the other. Some were having contests with the wine barrels they carried, and some were already so drunk that they were whispering sweet nothings to the inanimate brown casks.

In any other nation, this sort of behavior would be admonished and scrutinized, but Ruri loved the atmosphere. Everyone was praying for the fourier to come again so they could see them and be granted happiness. That was the excuse, at least, for everyone to go buck wild and drink up a storm. Ruri wanted to smartly point out that they’d all long since lost the plot, but instead she quaintly sipped on a sweet wine and chatted with Euclase and Seraphie while Jade tenderly watched over her.

Every time Jade would diligently bring food up to Ruri’s mouth, Quartz would look on, sulking and sighing with envy. “I wish I could feed Seraphie like that too...”

“I’m a ghost. I can’t eat. You shouldn’t dwell on it, dear,” Seraphie remarked.

“Yes, I suppose it never *does* work out for me.”

It hadn't been too long ago when Quartz sharing this sort of repartee with his wife would have been unthinkable, but despite some minor grumblings, Quartz and Seraphie looked very happy with one another.

Ruri put her glass on a nearby table and said, "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" Jade immediately asked. "I'll come too."

"That isn't something you should be asking a lady. I'll bring Rin along."

"Okay, then." Jade seemed convinced and decided to patiently wait at the venue for Ruri to return.

"I'll come just in case," Rutile offered, to which Ruri graciously agreed.

After leaving the hall and using the restroom, Ruri walked down the hallway back to the venue with Rin in tow. That was when Sango moved into her path. Ruri stood frozen, wide-eyed in surprise. Sango, dressed in her maid outfit, glared at Ruri as if Ruri had killed her parents.

"Say, you're the Beloved, right? They told me that you're from Earth, just like me, yeah?"

"Huh? Um, yes. I am..." Ruri stammered, confused as to why Sango was here. There were supposed to be measures in place to ensure that Sango wouldn't meet Ruri just yet, but Ruri figured that Sango had been called in because they needed more people to serve at the party.

Sango looked around Ruri before snickering. "So are those the only spirits you have?"

The only spirits by Ruri's side now were Rin and two low-level spirits. The others were having fun roaming around the party venue, so they hadn't followed, most likely thinking that there would be no problems with Rin around.

"You are being disrespectful to Lady Beloved. Mind your speech and conduct," rebuked Rutile.

"Shut up!" Sango snapped back, the warning falling on deaf ears.



“So that big clione was yours?” Sango barked, her eyes filled with discontent. “That’s a spirit too? Even if it is, I have way more spirits than you. And yet here you are being called a Beloved, living in the lap of luxury in lavish dresses? What do *you* have that *I* don’t?!”

Ruri was too intimidated to even interject.

“Why? *Why*?! Wasn’t I brought to this world for some reason?!” Sango shouted before suddenly going quiet and staring directly at Ruri. “Well, aren’t you going to say something? You’re a Beloved, right? If you’re a Beloved, then I can be a Beloved too. I could wear beautiful dresses, live in extravagant rooms, and be that dashing king’s wife. I’m sure that’s why I was summoned to this world in the first place, so give it to me!”

Sango screeched and reached out for Ruri’s collar, but before Rurite could stop her, Sango touched Kotaro’s barrier. “Eek! That hurts!”

Sango’s hand was red, indicating that she’d experienced some considerable recoil. That reminded Ruri that Kotaro had said he would be putting a “just-in-case” barrier around her. The extra insurance was clearly a tad overboard. She would need to tell him to lower the strength back to normal later.

As Sango groaned in pain, the high-level squirrel spirit looked at her with concern. Sango stared at Ruri with teary eyes, holding her injured hand.

“Why? Why? *Why*?! I’m a Beloved, aren’t I? I’m supposed to become a Beloved, complete some sort of duty, and go back home, aren’t I? Why is it that only *you* are special? Why am *I* not a Beloved?!” Sango screamed, tears rolling down her face.

Sango seemed to be venting at someone other than Ruri. She’d come to this world by sheer coincidence. There was no meaning behind it; luck simply wasn’t in her favor.

Ruri couldn’t help but sympathize with Sango. Coming to this world from the other side meant that, no matter how hard you tried, you couldn’t return. But how could you expect someone to accept that fact so quickly? What was so wrong with clinging on to a glimmer of hope that you might return home if you complete your task like the lead in a story? Even Ruri had thought the same at

first—that there had to be *some* way to return to her world—but no, there wasn't.

“What’s going on over there?!”

They all looked toward the source of the voice to see Jade and Finn walking their way with stern looks on their faces. Jade went to Ruri’s side as he looked at Rutile, who was standing in front of Ruri to protect her. He then turned his eyes to Sango, who was holding her red hand. His eyes looked as though they would shoot daggers, and he seemed ready to pounce on Sango at any moment.

Ruri clung to Jade’s arm in a panic. “Jade-sama, please, nothing happened.”

“The *hell* nothing happened. She did something to her, didn’t she?” Jade inquired, his question being directed not at Ruri, but at Rutile.

Rutile looked at Sango before standing in front of Jade as if to protect Sango. “Your Majesty, could you leave this situation to me?”

“Are you telling me to *ignore* someone who attempted to harm a Beloved?”

“This is my humble request, sire,” Rutile said with a deep bow of her head.

Ruri bowed as well, sensing that nothing terrible would happen if Rutile handled things. “Please, Jade-sama!”

Ruri peeked up at Jade, who looked to be intensely conflicted. He was most likely fighting against his instincts to eviscerate anyone who dared to harm his one-and-only mate. However, he ultimately succumbed to Ruri’s desperate pleading.

“Fine. I’ll leave this matter in your hands, Rutile. But there will be *no* second chances.”

“Thank you very much, sire,” Rutile replied, bowing yet again. She wrapped a handkerchief around Sango’s red hand and carted her away.

Ruri watched her walk off with a sigh of relief.

“You and Rutile both are too soft,” Jade complained with a sour frown.

Ruri chuckled dryly. “Yes, that very well may be, but I think it’s only natural

that Sango is feeling dissatisfied, since only I'm receiving special treatment when both of us are in the same boat. She's only a child—only sixteen years old."

"You mean she's *already* sixteen."

"Where I'm from, that's considered being a minor, so please, just try and overlook this."

"Just this once."

"Right. Once is more than enough. I'm sure that Rutila will handle things from here."

Ruri knew this from what she'd learned from the people around her. She'd heard that Rutila was a naturally caring person who couldn't abandon a person in distress. The reason Rutila was so popular was because so many people were indebted to her kindness. Ruri hoped in her heart that Rutila would take good care of Sango as well.

Chapter 5: To The Imperial Nation

"Hey, Ruri, can we?"

"Yeah, just a little~?"

"Just a teensy bit. Please?"

The spirits were requesting something in an adorable fashion, but Ruri knew that what they wanted was not adorable in the slightest, so she stayed adamant.

"Absolutely not!" she replied.

"Awww!"

"But! But! She said mean things to you, Ruri."

"We just gotta punish her!"

The spirits were all launching complaints about Sango. Their unique ability to communicate with one another meant that a description of Sango's actions had quickly spread to all of the other spirits. Knowing the story from beginning to end, the spirits were furious at Sango for picking a fight with their beloved Ruri and were set on personally returning the favor. Ruri was in the middle of it, trying to stop them.

"Heh heh." Despite Ruri's best efforts to control the situation, someone chuckled.

They were in Jade's office. Quartz was also there, looking as if he wanted to quip about Ruri's little dilemma. Ruri, however, was throwing a sidelong glance at the person who was trying to stifle their laughter from a short distance away.

"Jade-sama, what are you laughing at?"

"You seem to be having it rough, Ruri," Jade teased.

"If you think that, then why don't you give me a hand here, Jade-sama?"

Jade snorted, his anger still not quelled. "I can't. I feel the same as the spirits,

after all.”

Ruri sighed in disappointment.

“*Not even one finger?*” asked a spirit.

“I said *nooo!*”

It was shocking to hear such terrifying things coming from such cute faces. What were they even planning to do to that “one finger”?! Ruri was too afraid to ask.

There was a knock at the door, and Claus walked inside. Using this as an opportunity, Ruri ran the spirits out of the room. “Go on, go on. Play outside now.”

The dissatisfied spirits left the room as instructed, and Ruri breathed a sigh of relief. Turning her attention to Claus, she noticed that he was handing Jade some sort of letter. As Jade opened it and read its contents, wrinkles started to form on his brow.

“Is something the matter?” asked Ruri. She was concerned about Jade’s grim expression.

After he finished reading the letter, Jade looked up and said, “It’s from the Imperial Nation. Adularia’s symptoms have gotten even worse.”

“What? But you gave them the dragon’s blood medicine, didn’t you?”

“It seems to have had no effect.”

“Then...the situation is worse than we thought, isn’t it?” Ruri asked trepidatiously.

Jade nodded sternly. Ruri’s face tensed, as did Quartz’s and Claus’s.

“Dragon’s blood normally works on any sickness or injury, so long as the one taking it isn’t dead. I don’t know of any illness it wouldn’t cure, but...” Jade looked at Quartz pensively. “Master Quartz’s mate, Seraphie, passed away without the medicine having any effect.”

“Oh!” Ruri quickly looked at Quartz to see Seraphie come forth from the ring.

“Do you really think that the emperor’s sickness is the same as mine just

because the dragon's blood was ineffective?" Seraphie asked.

"I cannot say for sure," Jade answered. "Only you and Master Quartz and a select handful of people know of the circumstances of your passing." The reason most people didn't know was because Quartz had rarely ever let Seraphie out in public.

With all eyes on him, Quartz scanned the letter that Jade had just read. Once he finished, he closed his eyes for a moment before slowly opening them again. "Unfortunately, this situation *is* similar to Seraphie's. I think that we should assume the worst."

"The worst being...?" Ruri asked.

"There's a good chance that she'll die."

Ruri gasped, but she wasn't the only one. Jade and Claus did as well. Anyone who knew Adularia would react the same way.

"What do I say to Corundum?" Jade wondered aloud.

His pained words struck Ruri as well. She could count the number of times she'd met the emperor on one hand, but Adularia was so friendly that no one would suspect that she was a grand ruler. The last time Adularia visited the Nation of the Spirit King, she was happy and healthy. The fact that her life was in danger after such a short amount of time felt unreal.

"Claus, I'm going to the Imperial Nation now. Take care of prep work and matters in my absence," Jade quickly commanded, writing a letter on the spot. "Send this to Corundum on the double."

"Jade-sama, may I go as well?" Ruri asked, knowing that even though there was nothing she could contribute, she couldn't just sit idly by in the Nation of the Dragon King.

Jade paused for a moment before nodding and saying, "Fine."

Just then, Quartz jumped in. "Jade, I'm coming along as well. I want to see whether this actually is the same illness Seraphie had."

"Yes, I would appreciate that," Jade said with a quick nod.

After leaving the Nation of the Dragon King in Euclase's care as chancellor, Ruri and the others quickly made preparations to leave.

That was when Gibeon popped in and whined, "I wanna come too~!"

"Gibeon, if you're trying to get in the way, I'll slice you to ribbons," Jade snapped.

"Aww~! You're so mean, Mr. Dragon King!" Gibeon retorted. His unflinching pluckiness in the face of Jade's anger was commendable. "If you're going, then you should go on your own. You can leave Ruri here, and I'll guard her."

"You being here is why I can't leave her!" Jade screamed, his nostrils flaring.

Rutile, who'd been watching this all transpire, interjected, "But, Your Majesty, while I am not agreeing with Gibeon, wouldn't it be dangerous to bring Ruri along? By accounts, there is a chance that the Reapers are on the move."

"The Reapers..." Jade muttered. "Yes, that is a concern..."

"Hm? What? What about Reapers?" asked Gibeon.

Once again amazed by Gibeon's inability to read the room, Ruri explained, "They said they found traces of the Reapers being in the emperor's room. Everyone is on edge because they suspect that the Reapers might be involved."

"Wha—? Nah, no way, no how," Gibeon refuted with a chuckle.

"How can you say that for sure?" Ruri asked, unprepared for his surprising response.

"Well, 'cause the Reapers disbanded after their leader died years ago. Anyone calling themselves Reapers nowadays are a bunch of phonies!"

"Huh?"

How did Gibeon know that? Ruri wasn't the only one with that exact question.

Jade wasted no time in grabbing Gibeon by the head with an iron grip, and Gibeon screamed. "Gaaaaah! Yow! Ouch!"

"Okay, you. Say that once more," Jade demanded.

"Oh no, Jade-sama!" Ruri cried. "Don't grip Gibeon with your dragonkin

strength, or you'll turn his head into a crushed tomato!"

"Don't worry."

"No, no, I'm going to worry about it. Let go of him, please!" Ruri pleaded. She managed to save Gibeon before the cracking sounds coming from his head became more severe.

"I thought he was gonna tear my head off..." Gibeon said in relief. Jade's grip had been so sudden that he'd forgotten to put up his barrier. If Jade had persisted, Gibeon would have actually been a goner.

As Gibeon crumpled to the floor, Jade relentlessly asked, "How do you know about the Reapers when so much about them is unknown?"

Gibeon pouted. "I'm not talking until you apologize first." He turned his head away, seemingly okay with dying today.

Jade was emanating anger, but he still caved in and murmured, "Sorry."

"Oh yeah? Your face doesn't look sorry at all," Gibeon pointed out, noting that Jade's terrifying stare looked like it could stab him to death.

"I did as you said, so talk. *Now.*"

"Yes, sir. Right away, sir. Sheesh, for a ruler, you sure are narrow-minded, Mr. Dragon King. Now, let's see, the Reapers, right? The reason I know about them is because I used to be one a long time ago."

"You *what?!.*"

"After being forced to flee my country, the leader of the Reapers picked me up, and I was a Reaper till he died. But I want to set the record straight. The Reapers were never an 'assassination guild.'"

"What do you mean?" Jade asked. It was said that those who were targeted by the Reapers faced certain death, but Gibeon's words contradicted the fact that people had been killed by them in the past.

"The leader was actually a sweet, kindhearted person, the type who couldn't ignore a person in need," Gibeon explained. "So, y'see, in order to assist people who needed to run because of unavoidable circumstances or who had a hit put on them, he helped them escape by disguising things as murder scenes. Soon

after that, the rumors took on a life of their own and made the Reapers out to be a guild of assassins. But the Reapers were a guild of kindhearted people who took me in after I had no place to go. They've never killed a single person. I can guarantee you that."

"And what you're saying is the truth?"

"I'm willing to bet my life on it. You can even interrogate me with Kotaro's powers if you feel so inclined."

Kotaro's powers would show whether Gibeon was telling the truth, but he had no reason to lie about this matter.

"Then that means the paper with the sickle drawn on it found in the emperor's room was..." Jade trailed off.

"Either a fake or a prank," Gibeon replied. "Or maybe a crime by someone who wanted to pin the blame on the Reapers?"

Jade, irritated, pondered this for a bit before running his hand through his hair. "I guess there's no point in contemplating from afar."

"Yes, but now it's very likely that the Reapers are fake," Rutile noted.

Jade nodded and said, "Sorry, but take care of things while I'm away."

Rutile would be staying in the Nation of the Dragon King.



Ruri, Jade, and a few elite dragonkin set off for the Imperial Nation. It was a tough flight, even with Kotaro's wind powers, so by the time they arrived, everyone was worn out. Naturally, that went for Ruri, but not even the sturdy dragonkin could hide the exhaustion written on their faces. On the other hand, thanks to this slog, they were able to reach the nation in record time—so much so that the welcome party that came to greet them was astonished.

Perhaps because Jade had informed him beforehand, as soon as they arrived at the imperial palace, they were granted an audience with Corundum, the imperial consort.

"Your Majesty the Dragon King and Lady Beloved, thank you very much for coming all this way on such short notice," Corundum said.

“Let’s dispense with the pleasantries for now. Where is Adularia?” Jade asked.

Corundum’s expression turned bleak. “I’m afraid her condition has worsened since our last correspondence, and now she can’t even get out of bed. I can’t understand why this is happening to her...”

“And the dragon’s blood had no effect, I take it?”

“None. I gave her every last drop of the medicine you gave us, but there was no change in the slightest. There is nothing more I can do!” Corundum covered his face as if to hold in his sadness, his grim resolve making everyone fear the worst. “I am sorry. I need to be strong in times like these.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” Jade assured him. “Is it possible to see Adularia?”

“Yes, of course. I have made sure she hasn’t had any visitors except our sons, the doctors, and a few court ladies, but she told me to see you in if you were to come, Your Majesty. Would you like to see her now?”

“Yes, I would.”

Normally, it would be impossible to see someone as grand as the emperor as soon as one arrived. They felt as if they were being told that Adularia didn’t have time—at least not the time to waste on procedures for scheduling a meeting.

Ruri, Jade, and Quartz were the only three to enter the room—four if one included Seraphie. Rin and Kotaro also accompanied them. Seraphie, who was now visible, was constantly concerned about Corundum’s condition. She would glance at him and mull something over, a difficult expression on her face.

The emperor’s room was not much different from Jade’s. If there was anything of note, it would be that the color scheme was a bit more vibrant, probably because Adularia preferred brighter colors.

“How are you doing, Adularia?” Corundum asked, peeking anxiously at the bed where Adularia lay. “His Majesty the Dragon King is with us.”

A small female voice called out, but it was so weak and muffled that Ruri, who was only a few steps away from the bed, couldn’t make out what it said.

“Okay, I’ll get you up. Just tell me if it becomes too much.” Corundum slowly

raised Adularia's upper body, sat her up, and propped a cushion at her back. He then made space to allow Jade and the others to come forward.

When Ruri got close enough to see Adularia, she noticed that her face was as white as a doll's—a figure without an ounce of blood coursing through its veins. Her skin had lost its glow, and her face was so tired that it looked like she'd aged considerably in a short amount of time.

"So good of you to come, Jade," Adularia said softly, possibly because it took everything she had just to speak.

Despite it being so difficult, Adularia forced herself to smile in order to put everyone else at ease. Ruri couldn't help but admire her strength.

"I am truly blessed to have a Beloved, the Dragon King, and the former Dragon King here to pay me a vis—" Adularia paused, holding her chest in pain. Corundum rushed over to support her, calling her name, but she raised her hand to hold him back. "It's all right. I'm dying, but I still have time until I do."

"How can you say such a thing?" Corundum asked. "Don't speak of death so lightly. What would I even do without you?"

Adularia gently caressed Corundum's sorrow-stricken cheek, her face full of love and affection. "It's all right. I am still here with you."

"Ngh!" Quartz averted his gaze: he couldn't bear to watch. He was likely comparing himself with Corundum—with how his past self had been stricken with the despair of losing Seraphie.

Seeing Quartz's reaction, Seraphie floated over to Adularia. "There is one way that you two could stay together," Seraphie said. Corundum's head shot up, and a flicker of hope crossed his face. "If you transfer your soul to an object like me, then you can exist with your loved one just as you have even if you die. This process utilizes sorcery, and the success rate is fifty-fifty, but if it succeeds..."

"So I won't have to be separated from Adularia?" Corundum asked.

"No. She will lose her physical body, but she will remain here—just like me."

"Adularia, did you hear that?" Corundum asked, turning to her with a face bright and full of hope.

Adularia, however, did not reciprocate with joy. In fact, it was just the opposite.

Corundum slid his hand across her cheek in concern. “Adularia, why do you look so sad?”

Adularia took his hand and looked straight into his eyes. “Corundum. That method won’t be necessary. I will accept death. This is the way of the world.”

“Why?!” Corundum screamed, his voice echoing throughout the room.

In the midst of this, Rin flew around Seraphie and declared, *“I’m against that method too. Or rather, it’s impossible.”*

“But why, Rin?” Ruri asked. “There’s Seraphie-san, and she succeeded in performing it.”

“Leaving your soul in the world of the living carries its own set of risks,” Rin answered, tapping Seraphie’s astral body with her wing. *“See this glowing spot?”*

Just as Rin said, the area where her wing met Seraphie was shining.

Ruri nodded. “I can.”

“This, you see, is a sign that Light is protecting her soul.”

“What do you mean?”

“For starters, a soul is supposed to enter the circle of reincarnation once it leaves a physical body, but sometimes souls fall outside of the circle and remain in the world of the living. Those souls will gradually consume themselves until they ultimately disappear into the ether.”

“Huh?!”

The revelation caused not only Ruri to jump, but Quartz as well. Seeing as how he cherished Seraphie more than anything else in the world, he couldn’t keep his composure in the face of this news.

“Is Seraphie going to be okay?!” he asked.

“She is very lucky,” Rin explained. *“Because of her many years trapped in the pocket space and being under Time’s protection, her soul has been preserved.”*

And now that she's out of the space, Light is guarding her. That's why she can stay in this realm without her soul self-consuming or fading away."

Quartz breathed a sigh of relief. Ruri was similarly relieved for the same reason.

"But that does not apply to the emperor. She doesn't have spirits protecting her soul like Seraphie does. Making souls stay in the living realm unprotected is a fate worse than death. The death of the body means the soul will be carried over into the next life, but if it ceases to be, then things end there. There will be nothing for the next time. It essentially means complete termination."

"No way..." Ruri was speechless at the prospect of that all-too-terrible future.

"That's why I wouldn't recommend that method to anyone."

After Rin's warning, no one present even dreamed of suggesting that they try to preserve Adularia's soul. Corundum was left numb and exhausted.

As everyone stood at a loss for words, Adularia broke the silence by calling out to Corundum. While it was hard for her to even speak, she managed to voice her thoughts.

"Thank you, Corundum. Oh, how lucky I am that you love me so very much. Decades have passed since I became emperor. Thank you for walking this path with me."

"Why... Why are you talking like those are your final words? Please, stop..."

"I love you. And I always will," Adularia said, her lips curling into a blissful smile.

Chapter 6: Emperor Adularia

After the meeting with Adularia, Quartz asked the doctor for more details about her symptoms after they'd given her the dragon's blood medicine. As soon as he was done, he told Jade that he was going back to the Nation of the Dragon King.

Jade, not expecting him to say that he was leaving on the same day he came, suggested that he at least stay the night, but Quartz adamantly refused. Jade was unable to hold him back, so Quartz returned home the very day he arrived in the Imperial Nation. Before he left, he ominously said, "I hope I make it back in time..."

Perhaps Quartz had come up with some way to save her. After all, given what he'd heard from the nation's doctor, he'd said that it might be safe to assume that Adularia had the same ailment that had afflicted Seraphie.

That was only Ruri's wishful thinking, though. She couldn't possibly tell that to the ailing Adularia or the grief-stricken Corundum. If Ruri gave them hope and it turned out that nothing could be done, it would only make things harder for them both. All Ruri could do was silently pray for good news.

Ruri and Jade were staying at the palace for a while considering that Adularia's declining health made it hard to determine what could happen next. The Imperial Nation was left with an ill leader, and within the palace walls, the struggle for succession, which had been behind the scenes so far, was starting to surface. The uprising was likely the reason the air in the palace was so rife with tension—so much so, in fact, that even Ruri, an outsider, could sense the turbulence.

"The air feels awful here, doesn't it?" commented Rin.

"Warring over succession while a person is dying? Humans are greedy creatures," said Kotaro, adding to the stinging commentary. As critical as that might sound, Kotaro was by no means wrong. Neither Ruri nor Jade, who were sitting beside the supreme-level spirits, denied it.

There was a knock at the door before someone entered. A troubled-looking Finn came over and whispered something into Jade's ear. From the weary look on Jade's face, Ruri knew exactly what it was about.

"Again, Jade-sama?"

"Yes, *again*. The same *persistent* idiots."

"Ha ha ha..." Ruri let out a dry chuckle as Jade rubbed his temples.

The cause of his current headache was the imperial princes. Even though the woman who'd given birth to them was on the verge of death, the first prince, Roy, and the third prince, Samadan, were vying over the throne and incessantly asking for an audience with Jade. Jade said they most likely wanted backing from the Nation of the Dragon King or its Beloved, but neither Jade nor Ruri were remotely interested in sticking their noses into another nation's messy affairs.

The Fourth Prince, Orio, had also requested an audience, but after Jade refused once, he never asked again. He'd probably just wanted to welcome the Dragon King and the Beloved to their nation as an imperial prince, but when Jade said that he was busy and turned him down, Orio had simply requested that Jade allow him to greet the Dragon King once he had a moment to spare.

Jade wished the same could have been said for his younger brothers, but both Roy and Samadan refused to take no for an answer and constantly asked for Jade's status. As for Mariano, the second prince, he was currently away from the palace, so there were no issues to be had with him. He wasn't even vying for the throne since he was marrying into the family of a neighboring nation, and by his own admission, he never had any intention of participating in the first place. Therefore, the only two who had been butting heads were the first and the third prince.

"Which of them is it this time?" asked Ruri.

"Prince Roy," Finn answered.

"The first prince? I wonder why he's so persistent." Ruri was starting to get sick of all this herself.

"Perhaps I should send Corundum a complaint? Then again..." Jade trailed off,

remembering that Corundum was not only running the nation as acting emperor, but he was also preoccupied with his ailing wife. Even though it was a matter concerning his sons, Jade thought it cruel to pile more problems upon the man and kept quiet.

“I’m also against telling him. It would be far too stressful,” Ruri said.

“True,” Jade agreed.

“I wonder if there is any way you can get them to give up. Even though Corundum-san said I could stroll around the palace, they might just ambush me at this point.”

Ruri was referring to the fact that Corundum had given her permission to walk around the palace since it would make for a dreary visit just staying in her room the entire time. The palace was as beautiful as the one in the Nation of the Spirit King, and the courtyard was practically a forest. Both of these sights tickled Ruri’s interest, but it seemed as if either Roy or Samadan would be lying in wait just as soon as she stepped foot out of her room—an act that they would likely pass off as mere coincidence. For that reason, Ruri was staying put.

In fact, people were keeping a close watch on her door from the outside, by the spirits’ accounts anyway. “Ew, what? That’s freaky,” Ruri had said after being informed of this. She’s decided to lock herself in her room the entire time despite that being an awful prospect.

“Ruri? Want us to take care of ’em?”

While touched by the spirit’s kindness, Ruri couldn’t very well say yes to that question. “Take care...how?”

“When the prince comes, we set his butt on fire!”

“I’m all for that!”

“Aww, what? Why don’t we flush ’em with a buncha water?”

“I say we start a tornado and fling ’em out of the palace!”

“Woo hoo! That sounds fun!”

“No, no, no, you *cannot* do any of that,” Ruri said, shooting them down.

The spirits were their same old selves: they settled matters by force. Why was it that they always resorted to violence? Did the words “civil discussion” not exist in their vocabulary?

Either way, if a civil discussion were enough to turn these princes away, they would have done so by now, but that method wasn’t going to fly with them. A violent criminal would be one thing, but these were princes of the Imperial Nation—the granddaddy of allied nations. One unwise move could lead to an international incident.

Actually, maybe she could get away with it by saying it was the spirits who did it? The devil whispered that idea into Ruri’s ear before she shook her head to dispel it. “No. There’ll be big problems if you hurt either of them, so don’t do anything.”

“But aren’t they being annoying?”

“If they’re bugging you, we gotta eliminate them!”

“We’ll make sure they can never walk up to you again.”

The spirits all jovially bantered with one another, but if the people in question were to hear what they were saying, they would turn pale in fright. Actually, if Ruri were to let the princes hear them, they would probably stop coming—a pretty good idea.

“Rin, Kotaro, say something,” Ruri pleaded.

“If they will cause you harm, why not get rid of them?” Rin suggested.

“I concur,” said Kotaro, agreeing with Rin.

Ruri’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. With even the supreme-level spirits thinking like that, maybe it wasn’t so surprising that the lesser spirits’ thoughts were headed down dangerous paths.

As Ruri heaved a sigh, an idea hit her. “Oh, wait! If I can’t stay a person, I can just turn into a cat!” Ruri quickly pulled out her bracelet. “Jade-sama, can I go for a walk in my cat form? I’ll bring Kotaro and Rin along.”

“Hmm... Yes, well, they won’t try to approach you so long as they don’t know you’re a Beloved. Is that what you want?”

“Yes!”

And so Ruri became a cat and sneaked out of the room to walk around the palace with Kotaro and Rin in tow.

Reminiscent of a European palace, the walls and surroundings of the imperial palace were embellished with painstaking detail. The Nation of the Spirit King’s chalk-white castle had a more imposing and sacred atmosphere to it, while the Nation of the Beast King’s castle had an Arabian motif running throughout. The Nation of the Dragon King’s castle also had a European-style interior, but it was simpler and—possibly because of the tastes of the past rulers—less flashy than the Imperial Nation’s palace. There was more of a focus on functionality, which made the castle somewhat cozier, but because the imperial palace was fun to look at, the nation could have charged admission for a tour.

As Ruri walked along, taking in the sights like a tourist, she heard arguing in the distance and started heading in that direction. Jade might scold her for sticking her nose in something dangerous if he knew, but she couldn’t contain her growing intrigue. She hid herself and observed, assuming that she would be fine since Kotaro and Rin were with her.

There, she saw two young men talking, each with their own entourage. Both of them looked to be of high standing judging from their attire and general appearance.

“Who are they?” asked Ruri.

“Mmm, those are the first and third princes, aren’t they?” replied Kotaro.

“Aah, the problem children.” Ruri referred to them as such because they were causing a ruckus when their mother was in dire straits. *“Which is which?”*

“The tall, dark-haired one is the first, and the smaller, redheaded one is the third.”

“Oh wow.”

According to what Ruri had heard, each prince was born two years apart from one another. The oldest was apparently twenty-seven years old, so the second was twenty-five, the third was twenty-three, and the fourth was twenty-one. They were what one would expect from the children of a beautiful middle-aged

woman like Adularia. Both the first and third had handsome faces with well-defined features. They weren't quite at Jade's level of beauty, of course, but they were still in the running. Then again, maybe it was Ruri's spousal bias talking.

"Brother, you should stop being so pigheaded and hand over what is owed to someone worthy!"

"You don't think that I am worthy? I am the first imperial prince. I am the firstborn. Therefore, I am most worthy of the throne. Many of the nobles believe so as well."

"Deciding a sovereign based on order of birth is so old-fashioned. The Imperial Nation needs a breath of fresh air, and to do so, we need to purge those nobles shackled to their old customs and build the nation anew."

"While I agree with that, nothing good will come from rushing everything. We must take in the old and good as we make things anew."

"If you keep talking like that, then things will never change!"

"Now who's being pigheaded? You may be my brother, but if you keep up your flagrant behavior, then I will be forced to take action against you."

"Oh, trying to act like the emperor already, are you? Mother has not yet named the successor. Does that not prove that the first prince lacks the qualifications?"

"Mother is just being prudent. And besides, she is in no condition now to..."

Having had her fill of eavesdropping, Ruri quietly left the area as their argument continued.

"Hmmm... I heard that the imperial princes weren't particularly close, but that was total hostility. They don't seem friendly with each other at all," she remarked.

"If they both want the emperor's throne, then they would be hostile no matter how friendly they may be," Rin said. *"I've seen many instances of people who were once friends stabbing each other in the back and cutting each other's throats."*

Rin's words were convincing because of her long years of experience, but it was still so sad. For the sake of Adularia, Ruri didn't want her sons to fight each other if they could help it. Adularia likely didn't want that either. That said, it wasn't as if Ruri could do anything, nor was she allowed to. Ruri was the Beloved of the Nation of the Dragon King and the Dragon Queen. She couldn't get involved in another nation's succession issues.

"After seeing all of this," Ruri continued, "maybe deciding a ruler by strength like how the Nation of the Dragon King does is the best way to avoid awkward conflicts."

"Oh my, that's not necessarily true," Rin pointed out. "Try having a nation run by someone who's all brawn and no brains. The place would collapse in no time."

"You make a good point..."

"Well, with the Nation of the Dragon King, the Dragon King has absolute authority, but all important matters are decided through council, so they take appropriate measures to prevent such a fate. The treasury also sets aside a budget for the Dragon King, and if he ever goes over, he has to pay for it himself. The Dragon King cannot use the treasury's money of his own accord."

"Oh, really?" Ruri knew little of the Nation of the Dragon King's politics despite being the Dragon Queen. Jade and everyone else was careful not to discuss politics around her so as not to involve a Beloved in political affairs.

"The dragonkin are a rational race among humans and demi-humans, so I doubt there'd ever be any major mistakes," added Rin.

"Rational...?" echoed Ruri.

How could that be? In Ruri's mind, there was no connection between the words "rational" and "dragonkin." She suddenly remembered how Jade had acted around her as a cat. The word "rational" didn't fit the sight of him having a cuddle deficiency attack just because Ruri took a hiatus from turning into a cat. The same went for the other dragonkin. The way they got excited around a cuddly animal was a total abandonment of rationality. Then again, they were quintessentially kind people if cuddly animals weren't involved.

Basically, if one wanted to make dragonkin lose their rationale, they would just have to give them cuddly animals. One might even be able to take over the superpower that was the Nation of the Dragon King with one—a simple idea that was so ridiculous that Ruri quickly disregarded it.



Ruri moved from the palace interior to the court outside. The gorgeous, colorful flowers were a feast for the eyes, just like the buildings.

“Anyway, I wonder what’s causing the emperor’s illness,” Ruri said, then it dawned on her that maybe the spirits, who’d existed in this world since the beginning, knew of this mystery disease. *“Kotaro, Rin, do either of you know?”*

“We do. She was either stung by a bug called a tachyotoxian or the body fluids of that bug were injected into her. Though, they are very rare and almost never appear in public,” Rin answered, dropping a bombshell just as casually as could be.

“Wait, you knew?!” Ruri cried, shocked and completely flustered. *“Then why didn’t you tell us earlier?! If you knew the cause, then there might be a cure out there!”*

“Calm down, Ruri. We may know the cause, but we don’t know the cure. A sting from this tachyotoxian contaminates your blood, but no cure exists.”

“Not even the spirits know?”

“Spirits have no need for medicine, and because medicine is a human creation, it doesn’t fall in the realm of spirit knowledge. But even if we don’t know, there’s a chance a cure could have been made somewhere out there. Unfortunately, that information isn’t within the spirits’ sphere.”

“No way... But we still need to tell them the cause.”

“Quartz already did, didn’t he? He talked to the doctors here, and Seraphie was stricken with the same disease, right? The Spirit of Light was by Seraphie’s side, so they naturally knew of the tachyotoxian. Which means there’s no way that he didn’t tell them the cause.”

Quartz knew from the very start? And the Spirit of Light? Was it that it

couldn't be cured even if everyone did know?

"Be careful, Ruri," Rin cautioned. "The blood of someone afflicted by this toxin is toxic as well. Though, I'm sure Quartz also told the palace doctors about that."

"Say...is there nothing we can do? Nothing to prolong her life even if we can't cure her?" Ruri asked.

"No. I'm afraid that not even spirits are omnipotent," Rin admitted, her words weighing heavily on Ruri.

Then, one day, it finally happened. With her loving husband watching over her, Adularia breathed her final breath.



Many people mourned Adularia's death. She'd reigned well for many years and was very popular among the people, so the news of her passing prompted many of the nation to pray in front of the palace, hoping that she would rest in peace.

Among those in attendance at the funeral were the Spirit King and the Beast King, who had both rushed to the Imperial Nation. Since Jade had informed them of Adularia's worsening condition beforehand, the two of them had left their respective kingdoms before the tragic news of Adularia's passing could reach them. They were able to reach the Imperial Nation so quickly because of that.

However, due to the suspicious nature of Adularia's death, Lapis and Celestine, the Beloveds of those nations, were not attending the funeral. Ruri certainly would have been forced to stay home as well if she weren't with Kotaro and Rin.

In the end, they never found out who'd placed the paper implicating the Reapers by Adularia's bedside. It was thought that if they didn't know now, then the truth would likely be buried in darkness forever. If there had been a spirit at the scene, then it would have been a different story, but unfortunately no spirit saw the crime happen. Spirits only cared about what interested them, so it wasn't very surprising. The thought that this mystery would be lost to the

sands of time left Ruri feeling uneasy, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Many people attended Adularia's funeral proceedings. Cremation seemed to be the custom in the Imperial Nation, and at the imperial crematorium, Corundum and his sons spent their last moments with the coffin before it was placed inside. The second prince had also returned from his stint away from the palace, so all four of her sons were there.

Ruri could hear Corundum's sorrowful weeping from where she stood a short distance away, which stimulated her tear glands. Jade quickly handed her a handkerchief. She thanked him for it, wiped her eyes, and looked back at Jade. His eyes were completely dry.

"Jade-sama, are you all right?" Ruri asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. You might say it's heartless, but I'm used to people dying," Jade replied, looking over to the Spirit King, who gave him a wry smile. "Races that live as long as Awain and I do have just seen that many people die. Human life is short. I wish it would stop at Adularia, but Corundum and all of his sons will die before I do. If I were to grieve every time, then my heart wouldn't be able to keep up at all. The longer you live, the more you have to accept things as they happen."

"Jade-sama..."

"These are the times that I curse my luck for being born a dragonkin. I wish I could cry for Adularia, but the tears won't come," Jade said with a smirk, but his face appeared to be grieving Adularia's death well enough. He'd said that he accepted the death, but there was no way he didn't feel anything.

Ruri hugged Jade tightly. Jade patted her gently on the head in response.

"Cry on behalf of me and Awain. For Adularia," he said.

"Yes..." Ruri mumbled, clinging to Jade to hide her tear-stained face.

The smoke from the emperor's burning form rose high into the sky above.



After the funeral, the Dragon King, the Spirit King, and the Beast King

assembled. Not missing a beat, Ruri sat among them—as a cat. She actually wasn't quite sure why she was present at the meeting in the first place.

“Never thought that Adularia would pass away this soon,” Arman said, his face incredulous. Jade and Awain surely felt the same way.

“The issue is who becomes the next emperor? What do you two think?” Arman asked as he gazed intensely at Jade and Awain.

The Emperor of the Imperial Nation, one of the four great nations, had died. When Adularia became emperor, the succession had gone smoothly because she was the only child of the previous emperor, but things were different this time around.

News of the first and third sons vying for the throne must have already reached Arman's and Awain's ears. It wasn't surprising that they would be concerned about the rightful successor. As allied nations, finding out who would be the next emperor was an issue that the other three nations couldn't ignore. That said, it seemed as if the three rulers had no intention of meddling with the succession of another nation.

“The two most likely to become emperor are either the first or the third,” noted Jade, “but I'm not sure what kind of people they are since I've rarely ever talked to them. What about you, Awain?”

“The same, Jade. But regardless of who is the better candidate, that isn't a matter for us to speak on, is it? That decision lies with the nobles and citizens of the Imperial Nation,” Awain said, replying with a sound argument.

Arman awkwardly grinned. “Well, yeah. What you're saying is right, Awain, but having a foolish king in our midst is also a problem, and that's a fact. Did you notice? None of her sons shed a single tear despite Corundum being a sobbing mess in front of them.”

Ruri had noticed that herself. It would have been natural for them to get emotional when faced with their mother's death, but unlike their father, the four princes had been extremely calm—almost to the point of it being eerie.

“Did the princes come to any of you?” Arman asked, to which Jade and Awain both nodded. “I knew it.”

“By your reaction, I assume they came to you too, Arman?” Jade guessed.

“Yeah. It was obvious they were trying to get me to help them take the throne, so I kicked their butts out. Same for you two?”

“I have Ruri with me, so it was even worse. I felt obligated to give my condolences in the wake of Adularia’s passing, so I decided to talk to all of them, but the first and third persistently demanded that I let them see Ruri. Not that I had any intention of doing so, of course. What about you, Awain?”

“Yes, a similar affair with me. I was right in not bringing Lapis along.”

All three kings let out long, tired sighs.

“Being a king is hard work, isn’t it?” Ruri said, sitting on Jade’s lap.

Arman raised an eyebrow, and the corner of his lips twitched. “You’ve got it easy not having to worry about anybody’s business, Ruri, since you’re a Beloved. Ruri being here as a cat is a measure to keep the imperial princes from seeing her, I assume?”

“Yes,” Jade answered. “They don’t seem to know that Ruri can become a cat. I have her stay as a cat when I leave so that she can pretend to be out on the off chance they drop by the room and try to pass it off as a chance meeting.”

“Yeah, that’s the best plan,” Arman agreed.

“Indeed, I would like a bracelet like that for Lapis as well, but he’s likely to do something outrageous if I handed him such a delightful tool. I’d be too afraid to give it to him,” Awain said, lamenting his untrustworthy son. Lapis had a penchant for always falling in love with the first woman he saw, after all.

“Well, either way, if I stay here any longer, I’m only going to get wrapped up in this sticky business,” Arman stated. “Getting back to my kingdom as soon as possible seems like the best bet.”

Both Awain and Jade agreed with Arman. The three kings had reached a consensus, so their discussion was brought to a close.

The next day, Arman and Awain returned to their respective nations. Ruri and the others were readying to leave as well, but they were taking a little longer to

return because Jade was concerned about Corundum's haggard state. Apparently, the sight of Corundum so depressed reminded Jade of Quartz after Seraphie's death, so Jade couldn't just leave Corundum be. Ruri was not in any hurry to leave, so she encouraged Jade's typical kindhearted behavior.

Jade had been visiting Corundum's room diligently, hoping to alleviate his sorrow if only a little. Normally, this role would have fallen to his sons, but the first and third princes only thought of becoming emperor, and the second prince had quickly left for the neighboring country he would be marrying into.

When Ruri heard this, she had gasped in utter disbelief, but no one had chided her for it because everyone felt the exact same way.

The youngest, the fourth prince, was so shocked by his mother's death that he shut himself up in his room. He might have been the only one with decent sensibilities, but Ruri didn't forget that he'd been extremely cold at the funeral. Maybe he was just in so much shock that he couldn't accept the fact, or maybe it was something else. What that something was, though, Ruri didn't know.

After a few days, Corundum finally calmed himself, and Ruri's group prepared to go home. However, that was when the report came in.

Finn burst into the room without knocking. "Your Majesty!"

Jade's eyes widened in surprise. The usually calm and collected Finn was acting erratically. "What's wrong, Finn?" he asked.

"I just received word from the imperial consort. It seems that the first has fallen ill with the same thing the emperor had."

"He *what?*!" Jade exclaimed as Ruri stopped what she was doing. "And you're certain?"

"The doctors said that his symptoms are the exact same as the emperor's. The imperial consort asked if they could have some dragon's blood just in case. He figured that the medicine might work given that not much time has passed in comparison to Her Imperial Majesty."

"I see. That is certainly a possibility. I have extra medicine ready, so it shouldn't be an issue. Deliver it to them immediately," Jade said, taking a vial out of his pocket space and handing it over to Finn.

Finn politely took it and dashed away.

The air in the room had become heavier, and Ruri decided to voice her worries. “The same sickness? So is it contagious?” If that were true, then it was possible they both could contract it as well.

Rin, nonetheless, shot down that theory. *“As I said before, body fluids of tachyotoxian insects entering the body triggers this disease, so if you were to catch it, then you would have to have the afflicted’s blood injected into you. Both you and the King only talked to her, right? You definitely wouldn’t have caught it from that.”*

Ruri was relieved to hear that, but she couldn’t completely rest easy. “Then does that mean there are other bugs around?”

“Well, for one thing, there aren’t supposed to be tachyotoxians in this region. I’m not too sure how the emperor contracted the disease in the first place,” Rin said, unsure herself.

Just then, Jade proposed a theory. “This is just a hypothetical, but what are the chances that Adularia’s illness was caused by someone *deliberately* injecting her with that bug’s fluids or the blood of a poisoned individual?”

Ruri looked at Jade in surprise.

“If anything, that is the more likely possibility,” Rin said. *“The tachyotoxians aren’t local to this area. A deliberate attack would explain things.”*

Jade’s face turned grim. “Gibeon said it himself. If there are Reapers, they’re fake. It could be that these fakes are trying to pin the crime on the Reapers.”

“Jade-sama... What are we going to do now?” Ruri asked, her expression tense with worry.

Jade took Ruri into his arms and stroked her head to calm her anxiety. “We’re not doing anything. We’re just going to tell Corundum about this, then be on our way.”

“But...”

“Assuming it’s the same sickness as Adularia’s, there’s nothing we can do if the dragon’s blood doesn’t work. The bigger problem is that you and the other

dragonkin could be harmed by continuing to stay here, especially if Adularia's death was caused by someone else and we have no idea why."

"I agree with the king," Rin said.

"As do I," Kotaro added. *"I can protect you from physical injuries, but fighting poison with my powers is difficult. I think we should return to the Nation of the Dragon King as soon as we can."*

The two supreme-level spirits were the most worried about Ruri. Jade also valued Ruri above all else, and at the same time, he couldn't involve himself in the Imperial Nation's affairs any longer. His position as king would not allow it. Ruri could only nod in compliance, but she was terribly frustrated at having to accept this situation for what it was.

In the end, the dragon's blood had no effect on the first imperial prince. At that point, there was nothing more Ruri and the others could do in the nation. They had no choice but to return home, feeling completely ineffectual.

It was just as they were about to return to the Nation of the Dragon King that things took a sudden turn.

Quartz, who was supposed to have returned to the Nation of the Dragon King earlier, returned—with the Queen of Yadacain in tow.

Chapter 7: Special Medicine

Quartz appeared before everyone, out of breath and panting, much to the surprise of Jade and Finn. Ruri was surprised as well, and she stared at Quartz, her eyes wide.

“Master Quartz?” Jade uttered. “Why? Didn’t you leave for the Nation of the Dragon King?”

Quartz nodded. “Yes, I did leave, but it wasn’t to simply go home. I wanted to bring her here.”

“Her?”

Behind Quartz stood a woman who didn’t even try to hide her displeasure. Ruri cocked her head, wondering who the woman was, but Jade seemed to be shocked beyond words.

“Why did you bring her?!” Jade cried. “What is the meaning of this, Master Quartz?!”

Ruri could tell that the woman must have been an acquaintance of Jade’s, but she was still the only one who didn’t know who the woman was.

The woman looked a little older than Ruri. Her hair had probably been neatly tied up before traveling, but now it was extremely frazzled and blown out, resembling a bird’s nest. She had been trying to fix it with a comb, a sulky look on her face.

Seeing the difficulties the woman was having because of her long hair, Ruri pulled her own comb out of her pocket space and asked, “May I?”

The woman merely nodded.

“Okay then, here I go,” Ruri said, running the comb through the woman’s hair, and soon the luster returned to her silky strands. Her hair was so smooth that it impressed Ruri a little bit. How in the world had her beautiful locks ended up looking like a disheveled bird’s nest?

“I have that lizard over there to thank for my hair being a mess. I knew I shouldn’t have come along with him. Imagine having to drop off the court ladies I brought with me halfway because they were too heavy for you. I’m speechless.”

“You sure are talkative for someone so speechless,” Quartz quipped. “It’s only natural that your hair would get messed up since you were riding atop my dragon form at high speeds, isn’t it? You knew that would happen, and yet you went through the wasted effort of neatly tying up your hair.”

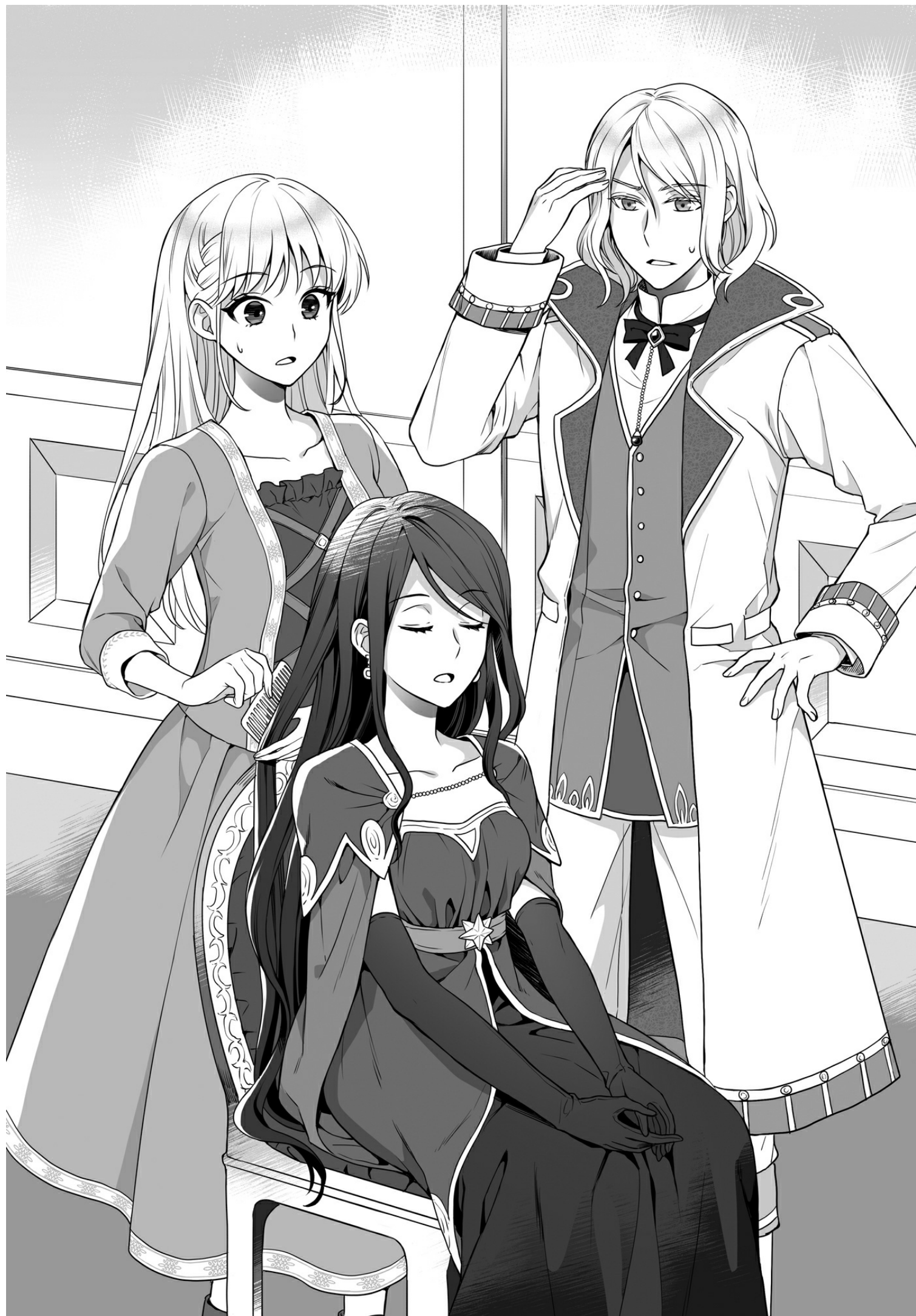
“Hmph! I know there’s no way a lizard could understand a woman’s heart. Seraphie has terrible taste in men if she chose someone like you.”

It seemed that the woman was acquainted with Seraphie as well, but who in the world was she? Question marks popped up around Ruri’s head as she continued to comb the woman’s hair, until she finally decided to ask, “Um, Jade-sama? Quartz-sama? Who might this person be?”

Upon hearing her question, Jade made a sour face and Quartz awkwardly grinned.

“Yes, well, you see, she is the Queen of Yadacain,” Quartz answered.

“What?!”



Ruri stopped her hand in surprise and stared at the woman. “The Queen of Yadacain as in...*that* Yadacain? Isn’t she also a Beloved?”

“This is the first time you’ve met her, isn’t it?” Quartz asked. “Her name is Pearl. As I said, she is the Queen of Yadacain. Pearl, the girl fixing your hair at this very moment is the Beloved of the Nation of the Dragon King. She’s also Jade’s mate, but I assume Jade needs no introduction, yes?”

Pearl glanced at Jade, turned up her nose, and promptly looked to the side, instead focusing her attention on Ruri. “So you’re the Beloved, are you? Ruri, was it?”

“Yes, ma’am. Ruri.”

“If you ever get fed up with your lizard husband, then you can come to my kingdom. You and Seraphie are welcome.”

“Erm... Thank you very much, ma’am.”

“Sorry, but Seraphie will never get fed up with me, so she won’t be going back there,” Quartz declared.

“Hmph. I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” Pearl retorted. “She might get tired of being a lizard handler, you know.”

Ruri had noticed that Pearl had been saying “lizard this” and “lizard that” for a while, so she ventured a guess that “lizard husband” referred to Jade.

It was taboo to call a dragonkin a lizard, but Pearl was using the word like it was going out of style—she had quite the nerve. Jade, however, seemed to be more concerned about the fact that the Queen of Yadacain was here than her name-calling.

He also didn’t seem too fond of Pearl, but, well, that was somewhat understandable. After all, Jade had been locked in conflict with Yadacain not too long ago. Welcoming her with smiles and open arms might have been difficult for him.

Ruri, on the other hand, didn’t get a negative impression from Pearl, judging from what she’d seen so far. She had imagined a more selfish and ill-tempered woman, but Pearl appeared to be no different than any other person. Even

though Ruri knew it to be true, it was hard to believe that this woman could have caused such a major issue. That being said, the question on Ruri's mind at the moment was what she was doing here in the first place.

Quicker than Ruri could ask, Jade spoke up. "Master Quartz, what is the meaning of this?!" he pressed Quartz, not even hiding his irritation.

"Now, now. Calm down, Jade," Quartz replied.

"How do you expect me to be *calm*?! Have you forgotten what she and the Spirit of Darkness did to our kingdom?!"

"I am also responsible for that. As well as the Spirit of Darkness."

"Where is the Spirit of Darkness? Did you not bring him along with you? He was supposed to be tasked with keeping an eye on the queen."

Pearl looked miffed as she interjected, "He is not my watchman, nor does such a task exist. I do not need your permission to come here. Get that straight."

"Do you *still* not realize the gravity of your actions in the past?" Jade growled.

Sparks flew between the two as Quartz watched in exasperation, his hands figuratively tied.

"Okay, okay. Stop fighting. I'm *begging* you," Quartz pleaded. "Now isn't the time for that, is it? That goes for you too, Pearl. Why do you think I even brought you here?"

Jade stopped glaring at Pearl and instead directed his gaze to Quartz. "What do you mean by that, Master Quartz?!"

"Jade, calm yourself. I'm about to explain myself."

Ruri also intervened to calm Jade. "Okay, Jade-sama, deep breaths. This isn't like you, and you know it. Let's put the fighting on hold and hear what Quartz-sama has to say, okay?"

Jade took a few deep breaths to calm himself, perhaps realizing that he was more agitated than usual. As expected, he regained his composure in no time. Rin wasn't wrong when she'd said that dragonkin were a rational race.

Yadacain had kidnapped dragonkin in the past, so given his sense of camaraderie, Jade had reacted very strongly to the queen's presence. Just thinking of his brethren would trigger that response.

"I brought her here in order to cure the emperor's illness," Quartz said.

Everyone's eyes widened.

"Can she?! But, Lady Seraphie, she..." Jade trailed off, not wanting to say the word "died" in front of Quartz.

Nevertheless, Quartz seemed to understand him well enough. "Yes, Seraphie died. Because of her death, I set out on a journey to search for her, but that led me to Yadacain, where in the process, I met with its queen. We were alike in the sense that we had both lost a loved one, and not only that, but the disease that had taken our dearly beloveds was one and the same."

"The tachyotoxian bug," said Ruri, the first to speak up.

"That's right. Yadacain is one of the few places in the world where tachyotoxians live. But since they are only found in a very small area, you're usually in no danger if you stay away. The people of Yadacain know this and don't enter their habitat, but a child accidentally did. Pearl's fiancé went to help them, resulting in him being stung and dying shortly thereafter."

"Then what about Seraphie-san?" Ruri asked, remembering that Seraphie was in the Nation of the Dragon King as Quartz's mate when she fell ill. Also, she had been mostly shut up in her room by Quartz, who hated letting her out in public.

"As for Seraphie, I don't know how the tachyotoxian's venom entered her body," Quartz explained as Seraphie—who'd exited from the ring in the midst of the conversation—furrowed her brow. That was a sign that she had no recollection of how it had happened herself.

"Anyway, let's put that aside for now," Quartz said. "The important facts are that Seraphie and Pearl's fiancé both died due to tachyotoxians and that the disease wasn't curable even with dragon's blood. However, Pearl couldn't allow someone else to die by tachyotoxians in the same way in the future, so at the same time she was looking for a way to resurrect the dead, she was also developing an antidote for the tachyotoxian venom."

It now became apparent to everyone why Quartz had brought Pearl along.

“So there is a medicine to fight off the tachyotoxian venom?” Jade asked, his eyes hopeful.

Quartz nodded, and a glimmer of hope shone in the room, but Quartz’s expression remained dour. “There is, but it seems I unfortunately didn’t make it in time to save the emperor...”

The atmosphere instantly turned grim.

“Honestly, I wanted to come quicker, but Pearl launched into a tirade about why *she* had to make the medicine and demanded that I bring the emperor to her.”

“That’s crazy talk,” Ruri said, the words escaping from her mouth before she realized. Adularia had already been in such poor condition that she hadn’t even been able to get out of bed, much less take a daylong trip to Yadacain.

“It was out of my hands,” Pearl elaborated. “Much preparation is needed to make the medicine. I thought it’d be quicker to bring the ill to me while I readied it. I am also the only one who can make it, so I can’t leave the task to anyone else.”

“And that’s why I brought her here, thankfully. Seraphie convinced her as best she could,” Quartz explained.

Pearl snorted, her arms folded. “I came because Seraphie asked me to. I’m not here on a reptilian charity call.” Apparently, she didn’t have the best impression of Quartz.

Quartz had said they were alike in that they both had lost a loved one, but there were probably a lot of complicated feelings related to that that only the two of them could sort out.

“That aside, this whole trip was a waste,” Pearl stated. “The emperor is dead, isn’t she? We rushed all the way here for nothing.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” Quartz muttered, looking downcast.

To everyone else present, though, his timing couldn’t have been any better.

“No, the word is that the first prince has come down with the same illness as

Adularia,” Jade explained.

“What? Really?” Quartz asked, shocked by the news, but he could tell that Jade wasn’t joking from the look on his face. He put his hand on his chin contemplatively. “The Spirit of Light told me that tachyotoxians do not exist in the Imperial Nation, but could it be that he somehow ingested some of the emperor’s blood?”

“I don’t know about that, but can you cure him with the medicine?” asked Jade.

“Well? Can you?” Quartz asked Pearl.

Pearl, looking displeased, asked, “How long has it been since the symptoms started?”

“Only a few days,” said Jade.

“Then there might be a chance. But I can’t make the medicine without seeing how the disease has progressed in person, because the mixing amount will vary based on that.”

“Jade, can we see the first prince?” Quartz inquired. “Once he hears that there’s a chance to cure him, I’m sure we’ll be allowed to see him right away.”

Jade nodded before quickly turning to Finn, who recognized the signal and rushed out of the room. While waiting for him to come back, Ruri finished fixing Pearl’s hair. Finn soon returned with permission to have an audience with the first prince.

“They said we can see him right now,” Finn announced. “Encouraged us to come quickly.”

“Okay, then,” Jade replied.

The group walked to the first prince’s room, where he greeted them all with a bow while sitting on his sofa. It seemed that he couldn’t even stand up, because he started with an apology.

“I am sorry for the seated greeting, Your Majesty and party.”

He was likely having a rough time. It was easy to see that the blood had drained from his face.

By the first prince's side stood Corundum. "Is it true that you can cure him? Not even the dragon's medicine that His Majesty supplied us with has worked." He was justifiably apprehensive about Jade's claim considering that he had already lost Adularia.

That being said, even Jade was skeptical about the validity of his own claims. "I would suggest you ask not me, but the Queen of Yadacain herself."

"The Queen of Yadacain?" repeated both Corundum and the first prince.

Pearl stepped out in front of the confused duo. "The younger one there is the one stricken with the disease, I take it? Let me take a look at him." She took out a needle and pricked the prince's finger.

"Yowch! Hey, what are you doi—"

"Silence, boy. This is required for the treatment," Pearl barked, smacking the prince across the head for resisting as she drained his blood into a vial. Once she was done, she carefully wrapped his finger with a cloth. "Keep this tightly under wraps. This illness infects others via blood. If you don't want to kill anyone else, be sure not to let others touch your blood by any means."

Shocked, the first prince made sure that his finger was wrapped up tight. While he did, Pearl held the vial of blood up to the sunlight as if to verify something.

"Mm-hmm, this is indeed the work of tachyotoxian venom," she deduced.

"Will my son be cured?" Corundum asked anxiously. His wife had just died and now his son had fallen ill with the exact same disease. One could only imagine how much heartache he was experiencing.

"Yes, this can be cured. You are in luck."

Corundum and the first prince breathed a sigh of relief, but then Corundum had a somber realization.

"If you had come earlier, would my wife have survived?" he asked.

He knew there was no point in postulating about what-if scenarios; Adularia had already passed away. Be that as it may, the thought still lingered in his mind. The wounds of losing his wife, his one true love, had yet to heal.

Pearl informed Corundum, “To be honest, from what I was told of the emperor’s symptoms, I believe it would have been a lost cause. This medicine only works on those in the early stages of the disease. I was told that quite some time had passed since the emperor exhibited symptoms. I most likely would have been too late even if I had shown up early.”

Corundum’s shoulders slumped. “Oh... I see...”

No one could find the words to say to him—no one except Pearl.

“I...I too have lost a loved one to the tachyotoxians. And I have made a great deal of errors because I could not bear the sorrow.”

Quartz shut his eyes.

“However,” Pearl went on, “I’ve come to realize that my beloved was by no means unhappy, even in demise, and that his memory still lives on inside of me. Although, it did take quite a while to realize that.”

Corundum covered his eyes with his hands. “Yes... Yes, you’re right. She had a blissful smile. Her smile is indeed forever etched into my memories.”

As Corundum choked back sobs, Jade looked on with a very conflicted expression.

“Jade-sama?” asked Ruri, having noticed this.

“I can’t forgive the queen’s crimes, but I can’t blame her either. I haven’t lost you yet, so I can’t understand her feelings or Master Quartz’s,” said Jade.

“It’s best that you don’t have to understand those feelings.”

“Perhaps, but knowing that I’ll experience them one day hurts my heart immensely.”

“That’s true...”

If she could, Ruri would want to live and die with Jade, but everyone knew that it just wasn’t possible. Death always came equally for everyone, which is why they wanted to cherish the time they had together. Ruri softly squeezed Jade’s hand, and he firmly squeezed hers back.

“I couldn’t save your wife, but I can save your son,” Pearl declared. She then

turned to Quartz and ordered, “Bring out my things.”

“Right, right,” Quartz said with a reluctant smile as he brought out item after item from his pocket space and put them on the table in the room.

“I’m going to make the medicine now, so hold on a second.”

“Thank you very much,” said Corundum, and he and the first prince bowed their heads together.

Pearl then got to work, drawing what appeared to be a magic circle on a large piece of paper.

“Erm, Quartz-sama? That’s part of the medicine-making process, I assume?” Ruri asked just to make sure.

“That’s right. Apparently, the remedy for the tachyotoxian venom is made with a mix of medicine and sorcery. I don’t quite understand it either, but Pearl is a very skilled witch, so just have a little faith and watch. Of course, she’s not using any Spirit Slayer magic, so you can rest easy.”

“Right. I will.”

“The bigger question is how Prince Roy contracted the same disease as the emperor?” Quartz prompted, and all eyes except Pearl’s turned to the first prince. “The illness can be transmitted by tachyotoxian bites or by taking contaminated blood into your body. So, I ask you, Prince Roy, have you touched the emperor’s blood with a cut on your hand or put any of it in your mouth?”

“No, I have not,” the first prince insisted. “I only had a chance to speak with my mother, but I never had a chance to come in contact with her.”

In that case, how had he contracted the same disease?

“Hmm... Maybe this means that there are tachyotoxians inside the palace?”

Just then, Ruri raised her hand. “Quartz-sama, about that. I was actually afraid of those bugs being around, so I asked Kotaro to search the palace for any.”

“The supreme-level Spirit of Wind never fails. Did he find any?” asked Quartz.

“Well, he gathered all of the spirits in the imperial capital to investigate, but he said that they couldn’t find any. Right, Kotaro?”

“Indeed.” Kotaro chimed in. *“Just to be sure, I extended my search to the capital, but there was neither hide nor hair of the tachyotoxians. If wind spirits could not find them, it is hard to believe that he was stung by one of them.”*

“Then I guess it’s more likely that he took in either the bug’s venom or the blood of someone stung by them,” Quartz deduced. “Although, I can’t imagine him taking it in by sheer coincidence.”

Suspicious coursed through everyone’s minds.

“Corundum, we can’t intervene from this point on,” Jade interjected with a stern look.

“Yes, I understand,” Corundum said with a look just as stern. “We will search the palace at once to find out if someone poisoned Roy.”

As everyone conversed, Pearl completed the medicine and said aloud, “It’s done.”

All eyes focused on Pearl, and Ruri approached her with great interest.

“Wow! So it’s really done—? Ugh!” Ruri cried, her face turning pale. She quickly covered her nose.

The bottle that Pearl held in her hands was emitting a very strong, very pungent odor. Not only that, but the liquid was a sludgy color—one that would make anyone wonder how it came to be—and it was spurting bubbles.

“It stinks!” Ruri exclaimed.

As the odor rife enough to cause dizzy spells traveled through the room, Jade and the others also held their noses. For those with a dragonkin’s acute sense of smell, this was probably tantamount to unleashing a bioweapon.

“Pearl, is *that* the medicine?” Quartz asked, holding his nose.

“What else does it look like?” Pearl retorted, thrusting the bottle before Quartz as if he had asked the most obvious question in the world.

“Queen Pearl, are you supposed to *drink* this?” Ruri timidly asked in place of the first prince, who was probably the most concerned person in the room. She thought maybe it would have been better if she’d asked if you *could* drink it.

“Yes,” Pearl affirmed. “Keep drinking this five times a day for three days and you’ll make a full recovery.”

“Five times a day?!” Ruri cried, shrieking in terror in her head.

Everyone in the room then turned to the first prince, looking at him with sympathy.

“F-Father...” Roy said with pleading eyes.

“Bear with this, Roy,” Corundum ordered, hardening his heart—and turning his face away as he pinched his nose.

“I can’t do this! That’s not fit for human consumption!” Roy argued, believing that he would die of different causes if he were to drink the mystery concoction.

Pearl mercilessly pressed the bottle to his mouth. “Now, down the hatch. Swallow every last drop.”

“Yeek!”

The first prince tried to run away, but Corundum hooked his arms into a full nelson. “Now, Your Majesty, please proceed as you were.”

“Yes, very well. Open wide, now.”

“Urghhh...” The first prince, unable to avoid his fate, downed the unknown liquid.

“How dreadful,” Finn muttered in disgust. Retching sounds beyond one’s wildest imagination echoed throughout the room.

While it was a terrible sight to behold, this was simply part of the treatment. Yes, a very needed treatment. It was definitely not torture.

Forced to swallow every last drop, the first prince lost consciousness the moment he was done. By everyone’s standards, passing out was unavoidable. They even praised the prince for his valiant efforts, but at the same time, they were concerned if he was still breathing.

“All right, he drank it. Next dose is in three hours,” Pearl stated.

The first prince, who lay unconscious, was probably lucky to have not heard

those words. If he had, it would have likely killed him.

“Quartz-sama, is that really the cure? The prince isn’t dead, is he?” asked Ruri.

“M-Maybe...and...maybe,” Quartz replied, even though he was the one who’d brought Pearl here. He likely hadn’t expected the cure to be such a powerful medicine.

However, even if Quartz had known, they would have had no other choice but to make the first prince buckle down and drink, seeing as how the medicine was the only way to save him.

Three hours later, the first prince finally awakened—only to be immediately accosted again by Pearl with her horrible medicine.

“Time for your medicine, sonny!”

“*Noooooooooo!*” the first prince screeched, the sound traveling far down the hallway.

Chapter 8: The First Patient

It had been three days since the first prince started taking Pearl's cure. They always said that good medicine was bitter, but this medicine wasn't that. It was, simply put, something unfit for *any* living organism to consume. Curiosity got the better of Ruri, and she licked a tiny dab she put on her fingertip, but that was enough to make her break down into tears.

The first prince went through a hellish loop of taking the devilish medicine, fainting, waking up, being forced to take it again, and fainting again. It was reported that this painful cycle helped him make a full recovery, but there was no doubt that it caused him considerable trauma. He even gave a terrifying account that while rendered unconscious, he could see his mother waving at him from the other side of an open field full of flowers.

As the prince was fighting the medicine and the hallucinations, an investigation was started under the direction of Corundum, and much to everyone's surprise, a contract with the Reapers was found in the third prince's room. The contract mentioned poisoning food in order to kill the emperor and the first prince. It was apparently found with documents about the tachyotoxian insects. The third prince naturally denied ever seeing the contract, but it was damning evidence.

Ruri and her group, on the other hand, knew that the Reapers had already been dissolved according to Gibeon, a living witness, and that the real Reapers had never killed a single person. Essentially, the contract was a fake. Ruri confirmed this with Gibeon again through the Spirit of Light in the Nation of the Dragon King, and he replied that the Reapers never bothered with troublesome things like contracts.

They weren't able to discern whether the contract itself was a forgery or whether the job was real, and they couldn't tell who the fake Reaper was who drew it up. The handwriting on the document was very similar to that of the third prince, but it could have been forged in any number of ways if someone

had wanted to. It was also possible that someone had it made in order to frame the third prince.

Seeing as how no one knew who the true culprit was, the first prince was in danger of possibly being targeted again if people knew that he was cured. Therefore, the first prince pretended that he was still bedridden to keep his condition a secret. The only people who knew the truth were the ones present when he took the medicine.

Corundum decided to not inform his other sons. While it meant that he doubted them, it was a contingency plan nonetheless. It was also most likely a decision that tore Corundum up on the inside.

Pearl, Ruri, and the rest had to stay behind because there was a possibility of others falling to the tachyotoxian's venom. However, if they just kept on waiting for something to happen, they would never leave the Imperial Nation.

Everyone brainstormed to at least figure out how the first prince had been poisoned, which led them to search for anyone else in the nation who had come down with the same illness. That, of course, was a job for the Spirit of Wind. Ruri asked Kotaro to search for anyone who fit the description.

"Well, Kotaro? Find anything?" she asked.

"It's going to take some time to search the entire Imperial Nation, so I'm only covering the capital for now."

"Thank you. I'm counting on you, Kotaro."

"Fear not," said Kotaro with a somewhat proud expression. He was evidently very happy that Ruri was relying on him, because his tail was wagging like wild.

Meanwhile, Rin looked on, displeased. *"Hey, I'm useful too~!"* she said adorably, bumping into Ruri in a jealous huff.

"Don't worry. I know. Thank you for always coming with me when I go into town."

"Heh heh. Yep. It's because Kotaro is too big to follow you into town," Rin said with a smug expression, peeking over at Kotaro.

"Grr... Yes, but right now, I'm the one useful to Ruri."

“You don’t have to be so competitive. I appreciate you both equally,” Ruri assured them, awkwardly smiling about the pleasant sentiments of the two spirits. That was until she was suddenly lifted up off the ground. “*Hywah!*”

It was Jade, who was looking at her with dissatisfaction as well.

“Erm, why are you making that face, if you don’t mind me asking?” Ruri inquired.

“You don’t know why?” Jade asked back.

“Not a clue.”

Her answer made Jade sulk even more. “I know that you’re a Beloved, and I’m trying to be considerate, but don’t you think you’ve been neglecting time with me as of late?”

“Have I?” Ruri wondered, clueless.

“You have!” Jade said with assurance, which made it hard for Ruri to deny it. “We’re still in what you could consider the honeymoon phase, yet one problem after another arises, and you’re constantly minding the spirits. Plus, there’s the extra added nuisance of Gibeon.”

“Um, Jade-sama, *you* were the one who brought Gibeon back,” Ruri reminded him. She wasn’t sure how to deal with that specific qualm.

“Maybe I should squash that insect...”

“You’re kidding, right?!”

Jade’s eyes were serious. Ruri debated whether she should write a letter to Gibeon back home that told him to run while he had a chance.

“Lord Kotaro, the search will still take some time, I presume?” Jade inquired.

“Yes.”

“In that case, I’ll be taking Ruri all to myself until then.”

Jade then walked to the bedroom with Ruri in his arms. Kotaro’s dissatisfied face was the last thing Ruri saw before Jade slammed the door shut.

Now all alone in the bedroom, Jade sat Ruri on the bed and lay beside her. “It’s finally just the two of us,” he murmured, the corners of his mouth twisting

into a smirk as he twirled Ruri's hair.

Jade's face looked relaxed, as if he had been freed from any and all tension. Ruri lay down next to him, and smiles naturally formed on their faces as they looked at one another. Perhaps it was because the tension that had plagued them ever since arriving in the Imperial Nation had finally lessened thanks to their unlikely savior, Pearl. Although the problem hadn't been solved, no one was going to complain if the two of them spent a little time together.

"Wouldn't you prefer my cat form, Jade-sama?" Ruri asked, thinking that Jade was due for a treatment for his cuddle deficiency.

"No. While I love your cat form, I want you to remain as you are. I'm afraid I might crush you if you're a cat," Jade admitted before pulling Ruri gently into his arms and taking her into his embrace.

Ruri snuggled her cheek against the warmth of Jade's face. "You know, Jade-sama, it's been a good while since we've been able to spend time like this."

"Indeed. You have too many people vying for your affection. I completely understand how Master Quartz felt now."

"How Quartz-sama felt?"

"Yes, I want to lock you in your room and not let you see anyone other than me."

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't do that. I'm not the type who can stay cooped up in my room. Seraphie-san is truly amazing, because I could *never* do that."

"Yes, I know that all too well. You would probably run away in three days," Jade said, sighing like a mother disappointed in their child—a reaction that Ruri thought was rude. "But just keep in mind that's how much I care about you." Jade then dropped a smooch on Ruri's cheek.

"Yes, I'm well aware," Ruri remarked.

"I feel like you aren't yet. I'm pretty confident that you would run away as fast as you could if you could read my mind," Jade confessed.

"Oh, please," Ruri shot back with a chuckle.

Ruri wasn't sure what Jade had considered, but she was confident that she wouldn't run away over trivial matters. If she could just easily leave, she would have run away long ago.

"Well, if you could read my mind, Jade-sama, I'm pretty sure you would be breathing easier," Ruri said, assuring Jade of how much she loved him. It might not have been enough to compare to the dragonkin's intense form of love, but it was still substantial. "I am a Beloved, so the spirits are often by my side, but there's not a day that goes by where I forget about you, Jade-sama. Just so you know, I think that I love you ten times more than you think I do."

It was Ruri's turn, and she planted a light kiss on Jade.

When Ruri saw the smile on Adularia's face as she said goodbye, she had thought to herself that she wanted to smile at Jade like that in her final moments too. Adularia's face had been so rich with love. That was the image she wanted to leave in Jade's memory for all time, plain and simple. Ruri thought of that and smiled, because it would be one of many memories that she would spend her life engraving onto Jade's heart.



The next day, once Ruri and Jade exited their room, Kotaro was waiting with his tail wagging.

"Good morning, Kotaro. Did you find anything?" Ruri asked.

"Good morning, Ruri. It seems that a person who fits the description was in the imperial capital a while ago."

"Really?!"

"They have already died, but there was indeed a man who had the same illness as the emperor. He died before the emperor fell ill, and there was a doctor who was examining him. He seems to be in the middle of a lot right now, but do you want to go speak to him directly?"

"Jade-sama?" Ruri prompted and turned to Jade. Ruri couldn't make this decision on her own.

"I'll discuss this with Corundum," Jade said and left the room. He returned a

short time after.

“What did he say?” Ruri asked.

“We’re allowed to investigate the matter Lord Kotaro looked up for us,” Jade answered. “If Imperial Nation soldiers were mobilized and this person has ties with the culprit, then it might tip them off. Also, with Adularia’s passing and the first prince being declared bedridden, the struggle for the throne has intensified, and there’s an extremely limited pool of troops that can be sent out. Corundum would rather us not be involved given we’re from a foreign nation, but there are few he can trust at the moment, so he has to rely on us.”

“So you’re concerned about Corundum-sama?”

“I’m saying that the hole that Adularia left isn’t so easily filled. Corundum is just the imperial consort, after all.”

The position of imperial consort only held meaning with Adularia around. Corundum was currently in command of the national government until the next emperor was determined, but there wasn’t much authority available to him as an imperial consort without any right to the throne.

Out of all of the imperial princes who were supposed to support their father, the first prince had been declared ill, the second was out of the country, the third was trying to curry favor with the nobles in order to capitalize on his brother’s being incapacitated, and the fourth—no one knew what he was doing. Adularia probably would have scolded them to get their acts together if she were around, but there was no one in the Imperial Nation at the moment who could serve as a reliable substitute for her.

“To be honest, I doubt that any of the princes would be able to run the country as well as Adularia even if they do become emperor,” Jade said, rubbing his temples in concern and worry. “If Corundum assists them, things will run smoothly on the surface, but I can’t imagine any of them listening to orders once they gain authority. They may be highly talented, but that very talent might drive them to not listen to advice and go out of control. Adularia most likely managed to keep the reins on all of them, but the same can’t be said now.”

Ruri couldn’t comment because she’d been trying to avoid meeting any of the

imperial princes, but seeing as how Jade had spoken with them on a few occasions, he had a more informed opinion.

“We have to let the nation decide that for themselves,” Ruri said. “After all, you can’t be the one who decides the next emperor.”

“That’s true. But just thinking about how I’ll have to deal with them as members of the allied nations gives me a headache,” Jade replied.

Adularia was a reasonable person, but that didn’t mean that her successor would be as well. However, now wasn’t the time to fret over succession to the imperial throne.

“All of that aside, why don’t we hurry off to that doctor?” Ruri suggested.

“Yes, right. That matter takes precedent,” Jade agreed.

Ruri turned to Kotaro and asked, “Kotaro, do you know where that doctor is right now?”

“I do. I’m keeping an eye on him as we speak.”

“In that case, Jade-sama?”

“Right.”

And so they were off to the imperial capital, but Ruri and Jade couldn’t go alone, so Finn was with them. As usual, Kotaro was too large and conspicuous to take with them, so he stayed behind, and Ruri took a single wind spirit in his stead. Of course, Rin, who could keep concealed in Ruri’s pocket, came along for the ride.

“I should have inhabited a small body too,” Kotaro lamented.

Nevertheless, Kotaro’s soft and fluffy body was Ruri’s favorite, so she much rather he kept as he was. If he ever suggested changing his body, then Ruri would definitely stop him.



The imperial capital was as lively as the Nation of the Dragon King’s royal capital. Although not much time had passed since Adularia’s passing, the people seemed to have regained a grasp on their everyday lives.

Guided by the wind spirit, Ruri and her group visited a small clinic just outside the heart of the capital. Surprisingly, a long line of people who appeared to be patients were in front of the building.

“Are these *all* patients?” Ruri wondered aloud.

“Yes,” Jade guessed. “We can’t push past all those people to talk to the doctor first, so I guess we’ll have to wait in line.”

If they had revealed their status, they might have been able to cut in line, but considering that everyone here was visiting because of some kind of illness, they were reluctant to pull rank. They had no choice but to wait their turn at the end of the line.

Figuring the doctor was very skilled, Ruri asked a housewife with a child in line about the doctor. “Is the line here always this long?”

“Oh dear, is this your first time visiting here?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you see, the doctor here is very skilled. They say that he used to serve as a doctor in the palace long ago.”

“Huh?! Is that true?”

“From what I’ve heard. Despite being such a great doctor, he gave up his position and treats us commoners for cheap. We truly appreciate all he’s done for us.”

The doctor seemed to be a very respected individual. Ruri didn’t want to think that he would be involved with Adularia’s and the first prince’s poisonings.

“The doctor also does research on diseases that are considered strange illnesses without cures. He’s created a number of medicines that cure incurable ailments and has even been honored by the state,” the woman stated proudly and boastfully, as if she were speaking of her own accolades. “Oh, speaking of which, I heard that someone died of unknown circumstances the other day. I think that was shortly before the emperor’s death?”

Ruri and Jade exchanged looks, but the woman continued on without noticing the serious shift in Ruri’s expression.

“The doctor is a kind soul, and he was devastated that he couldn’t save him. But I hear that he gained consent from the patient’s family and stored their blood and organs for research purposes. I’m sure he will come up with a new medicine to help cure the illness. People will patiently wait for hours on end to get the chance to be examined by such a wonderful doctor. You came here because of some sort of illness too, right? I hope you get better.”

“Right, thank you very much,” Ruri graciously replied. She then whispered to Jade and Finn, “Does that have anything to do with our case?”

“He’s taking his patients’ blood under the name of research? In that case, maybe he’s using that blood to...” Jade trailed off.

“He is also a former palace doctor. He might be well-known among the people there,” Finn noted.

Unsettling predictions started to pop up in their heads.

After waiting a considerably long time, Ruri’s group was finally up.

“Next, come on in~!”

“Finally,” Jade murmured under his breath.

They were all showing signs of fatigue, but it was time to get to work, so they pulled themselves together and entered the building.

In the small examination room, a man who looked to be about Ruri’s grandfather’s age was sitting and waiting. “Come on in. All three of you together? What are your symptoms?”

“We’re not patients,” Jade said, stepping forward.

“You’re not? Then what are you here for?” asked the doctor, perplexed.

“We’ve come to talk to you. I understand that you treated a patient with an unknown illness shortly before the emperor’s passing. Did you collect that patient’s blood? Is it here?”

“Who are you three?”

“I’ll simply say that we’ve come from the Nation of the Dragon King. We need to consult you. I hope for your cooperation for the sake of this nation.”

Perhaps Jade's sincerity got through to the doctor, because after a moment of thinking, the doctor sat up straight and said, "I'd like to give priority to the patients waiting outside at the moment. Can we do this after the clinic hours?"

"Very well. We'll drop by again around then," Jade said, putting his arm around Ruri's shoulder and leaving the examination room.

Once outside, Ruri asked Jade, "Was it a good idea to leave? That doctor might be our culprit."

"Yes, but he said he wanted to prioritize the patients, so I doubt he would open up and talk to us if we were to insist that he talk now. Also, I have Finn keeping an eye out if he does anything suspicious."

"Huh?" Ruri looked around to see that Finn was nowhere to be found. "When did he...?"

"I noticed when he left," Rin chimed in, poking her head out of Ruri's pocket.

"Hmm... Then what do we do in the meantime?"

"We'll go visit the house of that patient," Jade suggested.

"Good idea," agreed Ruri before turning to the wind spirit. "Let's see... Do you know where it is?"

"Over here!" said the spirit as it proceeded to lead the way.

Ruri and the others arrived at a house in a quiet residential area. They knocked on the door, and it wasn't long before a woman came to greet them.

"Yes, who might you be?" she asked.

Believing that the woman would be less wary of talking to another woman, Ruri said, "Sorry to drop in on you, ma'am. But we're here because we'd like to talk to you about the individual who died here a short time ago."

"Do you mean my husband?"

"Oh, it was your husband?"

"Yes... Please, come inside. We can have this conversation sitting down."

"Thank you. Pardon the intrusion." Ruri stepped inside and immediately regretted her decision. *"Yeek!"*

What caused Ruri to cling to Jade in sheer terror was what she saw before her—dozens upon dozens of insect specimens.

“Oh my, there are so many. Humans really are cruel, aren’t they?” Rin commented.

“Jade-sama, please go ahead of me! I can’t handle bugs!”

Jade giggled amusedly, but it was no laughing matter to Ruri.

The woman then apologized. “I’m sorry. My husband was an insect researcher. As you can imagine, I’ve gotten used to it, but I used to scream even louder than you did at first. Just sit tight for a second,” she said, clearing the specimens out of the room and ushering Ruri and Jade in.

Finally relieved, Ruri drank the tea the woman provided her. “I’m sorry to make you go through the trouble,” she said apologetically.

“Hee hee hee, it’s fine. With my husband gone, it’s just me by myself, so any guests are more than welcome.”

“We overheard that your husband passed away because of unknown causes or something of the sort?” Ruri started.

“Yes, that’s right. It happened so suddenly. He was a strong and healthy man who never caught a cold a day in his life. I’m not sure what it was, but he heard stories of a very rare bug in a faraway land, and he rushed over. I mean, that was pretty common for him, so I didn’t even pay it any mind, but when he came back home, he was already having strange symptoms. The rest happened in the blink of an eye. I had a very skilled doctor examine him, but he didn’t have a clue as to what it was either.”

“The clinic of the former palace doctor, yes?”

“Yes, that gentleman. He researches strange diseases, so I agreed to donate my husband’s blood as a sample for his research. I figured that it would be better than letting my husband’s death be in vain, but his illness has remained a mystery to this day...” The woman trailed off and sadly cast her eyes down at the floor.

Jade and Ruri remained speechless at this heartbreaking display, until Jade

asked, "What was this 'rare insect'?"

"Oh, let's see. I'm pretty sure my husband made a specimen out of one. Sit tight for a second."

Ruri started shrieking internally. Telling them to "sit tight" meant that she was going to bring the insect specimen to them.

"I don't want to see it, so you handle examining it, Jade-sama," Ruri said as she buried her face in Jade's arm.

The woman soon returned and placed a small box containing the specimen in front of Jade.

"Aah! That's the tachyotoxian!" shouted Rin from out of Ruri's pocket.

"What?!" Jade exclaimed.

"Huh? Really?!" Ruri asked, forgetting her aversion to insects and lifting her face to see the specimen. It was a very, very tiny bug resembling a ladybug, only a size smaller. The sight of this bug was okay for Ruri, so she stopped cowering and took a closer look at it. "Rin, are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm positive. The husband must've been bitten when he was collecting it. Then I'm guessing he died upon returning to the nation?"

"If so, that blood that she gave for research is dangerous. We'd best go retrieve it," Jade said with a grave expression. He then turned to the woman and asked, "What did you do with his remains?"

"Oh, I just cremated them and put them at a grave marker like usual..."

"Rin, cremation doesn't cause any issues, does it?" Ruri inquired.

"No, because they've turned to ash. The contaminated blood is what we should be afraid of. Maybe we should burn that specimen to be safe."

"I'm sorry. Thank you very much. This is a presumptuous request, but could we possibly have this bug specimen?" Ruri asked the woman.

The woman looked puzzled. "Huh? But this is..."

It only made sense that she would want to hold on to it considering it was the last thing her husband had collected. However, this insect was extremely

dangerous and couldn't be left in the wild.

"Please! We really need this!" Ruri asked again, bowing deeply.

Jade followed in turn. "Please, miss. We humbly beseech you."

They kept their heads lowered, determined not to raise them until they gained her consent. With a small sigh, the woman placed the tiny box containing the specimen in Ruri's hand.

"I understand. Please take it with you."

"Thank you very much, ma'am!" Ruri said as she bowed deeply once more.



After leaving the woman's house, Ruri and the others returned to the clinic. It was almost closing time, so they reconvened with Finn outside and patiently waited for the last patient to leave before entering. This time, they were led to a reception room instead of the examination room.

"Now then, let's hear about what happened in more detail," Ruri started.

"You apparently collected blood from someone who died of unknown causes shortly before the emperor passed away, yes?" Jade asked. "The man who was researching insects?"

"Yes, I remember that person," the doctor answered. "When I examined his blood sample, his blood itself had transformed into poison. When I tested it on animals, a single drop was enough for them to develop the same symptoms, and it slowly eroded away at them until they died. Also, the blood of those animals became poisonous, and any other life-form that ingested them would get infected, causing a negative chain reaction of sorts. I trembled in fear at how transmissible it was."

"I'll skip straight to the point. Did you give that blood to the emperor or the first imperial prince?" asked Jade.

"*Huh?*" the doctor uttered, looking blankly at them as if he had just heard something completely unexpected.

"Well?" Jade prodded.

“A-Absolutely not! I know how transmissible that blood is better than anyone else. There’s still no cure, so if I were to do that, they would have surely die—”

The doctor stopped midsentence. He must have realized what actually killed the emperor and that he was a suspect.

“W-Wait! I didn’t do anything! Honestly! Please believe me!” he desperately pleaded. His lips were trembling, and his face was pale. His fearful appearance suggested that he hadn’t done anything outrageous like assassinating the emperor.

“But weren’t you a palace doctor? You must know many people from the palace. You could have had the blood delivered to the emperor, yes?”

“I left the palace long ago! I don’t have the power to do that now! I swear! You’ll see that I’m innocent if you look into it!”

“Then someone else could have taken the blood and given it to the emperor?” Jade questioned.

“W-Well, many doctors come to study my research, but...”

Jade didn’t miss the look of realization in the doctor’s eyes. “But what?”

“O-Oh, nothing,” the doctor said, averting his eyes.

“If you realized something, then you’d best tell us for your own good.”

“But, sir, it just can’t be. That gentleman is a very kindhearted person, not the type to do something so monstrous.”

“*Who?*” Jade asked, staring a hole in the doctor.

“H-He has been supporting me for some time now. He has come here several times to gain medical knowledge and has even graciously assisted me with my research. He was very interested in hearing about the blood as well.”

“And who was it?” Jade pressed.

“Well, it was...”

Everyone was taken aback by the name that came out of the doctor’s mouth.

Chapter 9: The Truth Revealed

Samadan was born as the Third Imperial Prince of the Imperial Nation. His mother was the wise emperor, a popular ruler loved by the people, and his father was the individual supporting her behind the scenes. Although raised by wet nurses, his parents always made sure to show how much they loved their son, and he knew that he led a life more blessed than others, never having to worry about food, clothing, shelter, or any of life's necessities. There was no way he could ever be dissatisfied. At least, that should have been the case.

When was it he first harbored doubts?

His eldest brother was an imperial prince by way of the emperor, just like he was, but it was all but assured that he would become the next emperor because he was born first. Indeed, Samadan's eldest brother was wise and skilled, and Samadan was once proud of his brother for having learned far more than he had himself. Soon though, Samadan thought that he also would have learned the same if he'd been born as the eldest, a mindset that perhaps came from him gaining a rebellious streak at his age. Or perhaps not.

Shouldn't he have a right to become emperor as well? It would've been unfair otherwise. The firstborn was not always the one to take the throne; there were always exceptions to the rule. Shouldn't the best prince become the next ruler? That would be the best for the nation.

There was no definite time frame, but Samadan's discontent had pooled up like water dripping into an empty glass, and his relationship with his eldest brother, among all of his siblings, was not the greatest to begin with. That might have been in part because their philosophies were polar opposites; his eldest brother respected the old customs, while Samadan favored what was new.

It was a mystery as to why Samadan disagreed so much with his eldest brother when he didn't have such hostility toward his other brothers, and he thought that his eldest brother must have felt the same way about him. It was painfully obvious by the way he looked at and conducted himself around

Samadan. Nonetheless, their royal upbringings prevented them from showing their true emotions. Samadan especially didn't want to have unsightly quarrels in front of his parents, whom he respected so much, so he paid his elder brother respect like a good little brother—on a surface level.

Gradually, the eldest brother, who had respected the traditions of old, gained the support of the elder nobles with tenures rich in history. As for Samadan, who thought the Imperial Nation needed to adopt new things going forward, he had the support of the more burgeoning nobles. One could say their sibling rivalry formed from that point on.

His mother, the emperor, was still young, which was why she hadn't nominated the next in line for the throne. The eldest brother's party grew worried and impatient over this fact. Samadan's party, on the other hand, made an argument that Samadan was a suitable candidate because they were convinced that the emperor hadn't chosen the eldest brother yet because she found him unfit.

The second eldest brother hated conflict, so as soon as he found out that there was a war behind the scenes for the succession to the throne, he decided to marry into a neighboring country's family so as to not get involved. Unlike the Imperial Nation, this nation's traditions called for a male ruler, so the second eldest brother had gained the position of heir to the throne along with the princess he had always longed for. It was a power move that showed how astute and cunning he actually was.

Samadan was actually glad that he didn't have to face off against the second eldest since he had never been on bad terms with him. While Samadan was impressed that even he had the tiniest inkling of brotherly love toward his second eldest brother, he didn't understand why he had such an intense sense of competitiveness with his eldest brother.

When Samadan talked about it with the second eldest, he laughed at Samadan.

"That's what they call 'birds of a feather not always flocking together.'"

Samadan looked unamused, but the second eldest just laughed even louder and added, "Take a look in the mirror. You look just like our brother when he gets

pouty.”

After he became engaged to the princess from the neighboring country, the second eldest was away from the Imperial Nation quite often, all under the pretext of learning about the nation as the next king in line. Samadan, however, was likely the only one who knew his true intentions.

“If I stay here, then there might be some fools who try to recommend that I become emperor, so it’s better that I don’t remain here, to let the nobles know that I have no intention of taking the throne. I don’t want to give mother any more headaches considering she has to deal with both you and brother. That is the least bit of filial piety I can show her, I suppose. You also need to take it easy. If you think that mother will protect you forever, then you’ll sorely regret it.”

Unfortunately, the second eldest’s words became a reality. Their mother, Adularia, had fallen ill so suddenly that Samadan’s brain couldn’t even process it. Their mother had always been strong, beautiful, and resolute—a major influence who had helped guide the imperial princes down the right path as if it were second nature.

Samadan could tell right away that his eldest brother was extremely shaken over this turn of events, and even though he was trying to put on a brave face, Samadan knew. After all, he felt the same. Assuming that this illness was just caused by stress, Samadan tried to regain his composure, but once news broke that not even the dragon medicine could cure her and all they could do was wait for her to die, the eldest brother started making real steps toward taking the throne as next in line.

One might think this was terrible timing. People might have said that he was just a selfish son who’d used his mother’s illness as his chance to grab the throne. Be that as it may, Samadan could understand. He understood his eldest brother’s feelings so much that he finally figured out what his second eldest brother meant when he’d said they were “birds of a feather that didn’t flock together.”

The eldest brother wanted to reassure his mother. He wanted to tell her that she could decide the next emperor and it would all be okay because he would

handle things from here on out. Samadan was torn, though. He could end the succession issue at once if he just switched to supporting his brother, but Samadan was at odds with his brother's antiquated philosophy and couldn't bring himself to accept it. He was left with no other choice but to fight. He would settle the matter as soon as possible and report to his mother. With that, a full-blown rivalry formed with his eldest brother.

While the second eldest came back to the palace to ask about his mother's condition, he soon left for the neighboring country yet again. Apparently, he had caught wind of a plan. The people who'd been sitting on the fence, supporting neither prince, were getting impatient about being left behind. In fear that they would start to lose their clout no matter which of the two princes they backed, they plotted to help the second eldest ascend the throne. The second prince therefore decided on staying absent unless the worst happened to his mother since his presence would plunge the nation into a three-sided civil war. It was the right decision.

With the second eldest gone, that camp of nobles were left without anyone to back, and their murmurings died out. Samadan tried bringing the left-out nobles into his own fold, but his eldest brother had the same idea. In terms of power, the two were now evenly matched. Nevertheless, the eldest had many of the old-guard nobles in his camp, so the situation skewed more in his favor.

Just as Samadan began pondering ways that could help him turn the tables, the Dragon King and the Beloved from the Nation of the Dragon King arrived. If he could gain the support of those two, he could turn everything on its head in one fell swoop. Samadan could see the spirits because he had mana, although it wasn't very strong, but the eldest wasn't much of a believer because his lack of mana meant that he couldn't see them himself. He knew that spirits existed since he had seen magic in action with his own two eyes, but his faith in spirits was limited. Perhaps that was the reason that he seemed disinterested in gaining the Beloved's support, but he knew that he would be in trouble if his little brother gained it instead, so both princes had tried to reach out to them—only for both to be turned away before they could even introduce themselves.

As Samadan racked his brain over what he should do, his mother's battle with her illness finally came to an end. As he stood behind his father, who was

sobbing uncontrollably, he was hit with a bitter sense of loss. All that Samadan could think about was gaining the throne—a fact that disgusted even himself. He thought that maybe he should cry like his father, but for some reason, he couldn't shed any tears. His eldest brother was also there in body but not in mind, as not a single tear could be seen welling in his eyes. Then again, that seemed to be the trend with all of the brothers present at the funeral. It was likely hard for any of them to believe that their once-strong mother had simply up and died.

The night of the funeral, an unexpected guest dropped by Samadan's room—his eldest brother, carrying a bottle of wine in his hand for some reason. He rudely invited himself into Samadan's room, arrogantly pulled up a seat, and snidely demanded a glass. Bewildered as to why the eldest was there, Samadan prepared a glass as he was asked.

The eldest started pouring wine into the glass. "I had put this aside for the whole family to drink when mother stepped down as emperor," the eldest soberly explained, causing Samadan to gasp. "Mother carried this nation ever since she was in her teens, so I was hoping that she would pick the next in line and step down from the heavy responsibilities that being the emperor entails. That's why I had a special bottle of wine made in order to congratulate her for all of her years of service. But in the end, I wasn't able to give her a single sip..."

Just then, there was a knock on the door, and before either could respond, the second eldest walked into the room.

"You're late, Mariano," said the eldest.

"My apologies, brother. I was busy trying to convince Orio."

"Well? Where is he?"

Mariano said nothing and shook his head.

"I see. Well, his loss. The three of us will drink. Come, Samadan. Sit."

"Right."

The eldest placed a glass in front of each of them, the last being placed in front of an empty seat. Then, holding his own glass, he spoke to the empty seat. "Mother, you were a great ruler. I do not know if I or Samadan will be the next

emperor, but I hope that neither of us will shame your legacy.”

As Samadan listened, the corners of his eyes started to burn. Despite not crying at all in front of his mother’s body, the inkling of tears started to form now.

The eldest raised his glass. “To mother.”

The second brother took his glass and tapped it against the eldest’s. “To mother.”

Samadan followed suit, raising his glass and tapping it against his siblings’.

They all downed the wine in one go. The eldest went to pour another round, but Samadan’s hand froze once he saw his brother’s face. Tears were rolling down it—silent tears.

“B-Brother...”

“Drink up, Samadan. You too, Mariano.”

The second eldest smiled, tears forming in his eyes as well. Drawn by this outpouring of emotions, Samadan’s eyes also started to leak.

“These tears are just for today. I won’t be going easy on you tomorrow, Samadan. *I will be the emperor!*” the eldest said, half crying. He didn’t sound convincing in the least.

Despite that, Samadan was determined not to be bested. “That’s *my* line, brother.”

“I don’t care either way, but could you both please stop trying to kill each other?” asked the second eldest.

“Yes, I know,” the eldest acknowledged.

“Well, that puts me in an awkward spot. I figured it would be faster to assassinate my brother,” quipped Samadan.

“Hey, Samadan,” the eldest fired back.

“It’s just a joke.”

“It doesn’t *sound* like a joke!”

Samadan and the others spent the night cracking jokes and forgetting about their feud over the throne. The next day, it was right back to business, and there was no holding back this time. It wasn't long, though, before Samadan was informed that the eldest had fallen ill, just like his mother. It was shocking, unbelievable even.

The second eldest was no longer in the nation as he had quickly returned to the neighboring country to avoid getting involved, as usual, so Samadan had no one to confide in. His mother was gone. His brother was in dire straits. All these facts put a tremendous amount of stress on Samadan's shoulders.

He couldn't confide in the nobles that were supporting him either. After all, while they didn't hate each other, his eldest brother was also an enemy vying for the throne. They would probably shout that this was an opportunity. In actuality, many of Samadan's supporters were ecstatic about his brother falling ill. Looking at those nobles filled Samadan with intense disgust. That was his *brother* they were talking about. Why were they celebrating when his sibling—his own flesh and blood—was bedridden?

That was when Samadan first realized that these people were only looking out for their own benefit, allied to him only on a surface level. In spite of that, it was natural that none of these people could be trusted. The people affiliated with Samadan were burgeoning nobles. With such relatively new and shallow track records, their loyalty toward the imperial family was thin at best—not because they looked down on them, but because their own interests took precedence.

That made Samadan wonder what the situation was like in his brother's camp. Many noble families rich in history were affiliated with him, and they had been loyal servants to the imperial family since the days of yore and were proud of that fact. They'd been trying to protect the imperial family even if it was to their detriment. His brother had plenty of followers who wouldn't hesitate to give their lives to protect him.

Samadan looked around him, doubtful that he had anyone who would do the same for him, but there was no backing down now. Since the eldest had fallen ill with the same affliction that took their mother, he would meet the same fate. And if so, what would happen then? The burgeoning nobles would hold enough

sway to make the more loyal and older nobles distance themselves from the imperial family. That could wind up destroying the Imperial Nation as a whole.

Samadan had no choice but to quickly connect with the nobles of his brother's faction and work to bring them into his fold. However, the history-respecting nobles disliked Samadan for his active efforts to incorporate new ideologies. They would never switch sides so easily, but he had to try regardless. The situation would be dire if he couldn't restore balance between the nobles before the worst befell his brother.

Without so much as visiting his brother, Samadan scrambled to protect the very nation his mother watched over until her dying days. Sadly, that was when Samadan met with even more disaster. He was told that a contract to assassinate his mother and the eldest prince was found in his room. That was inconceivable. Disagree as they might, Samadan had never once thought of killing anyone. He realized that someone was plotting against him, but he had no evidence to prove it.

Samadan's father told him to confine himself to his room for the time being, but once he started thinking about his brother's condition, the nobles, and the next in line for the throne, he grew impatient and frustrated with every passing day.



One day, Samadan's younger brother, Orio, visited his room. Orio was timid and kind, completely incapable of participating in power struggles. In fact, when their mother passed away, his sadness had caused him to shut himself up in his room. He had probably been in so much shock that he hadn't come out of his room when the second eldest called for him on the night of the funeral.

"Orio, you're out of your room?"

Orio smiled sadly. "Yes. I cannot stay cooped up with matters as they are."

"Sorry. I need to be setting a firm example, but I can't even leave my room," Samadan lamented.

"That isn't your fault, though. Some nobles are saying that you are the culprit, but I believe in you. I know that you would never deliver orders to kill Roy,

much less mother.”

“Thank you, Orio,” Samadan said. His younger brother had soothed his heart.

“I figured you’d like a change of pace, so I brought some relaxing tea with me. I’ll brew up a batch,” Orio said, setting out a pot and cups from a tea trolley that he’d brought with him.

As he watched on, Samadan softly smiled. “Thank you. You truly are kind. But I worry that your kindness will not mesh with this greed-ridden aristocratic society.”

“I am an imperial prince as well. I am just as capable as all of you,” Orio stated.

“You don’t have to strain yourself. I’m under suspicion now, but I’ll prove my innocence and become emperor soon enough. I’m not going to make you become the ruler,” Samadan said, knowing there was no way that his kind younger brother could ever take the helm with the nobles.

If he were to put Orio in front of those greedy nobles, they would just treat him as their little puppet, and that was something that Samadan wasn’t going to let happen. As his older brother, Samadan needed to protect him—for his mother’s sake as well. Yes, Samadan was imbued with a sense of duty.

“So, please, don’t worry!” Samadan finished.

Orio, who had his back turned, met Samadan’s strong, reassuring words with silence.

“Orio?” asked Samadan, perplexed by his younger brother’s lack of response.

Orio looked back at Samadan with a sweet smile and said, “Oh, no. I was just so moved by your words, brother.”

“Oh, I see. I’m glad to hear that, then.”

“The tea is ready. Here you go.”

“Yes, thank you.” Samadan picked up the cup set before him, taking in the aroma. “It smells great.”

“I used herbs grown inside the palace.”

“We’ve had these here?”

“Indeed,” Samadan answered. “I used to serve it to mother when she felt tired.”

“I had no idea. No doubt it made her happy.”

“Yes, she would happily drink until the pot was empty, in fact. I can’t wait for you to drink it and give me your opinion.”

“Then without further ado...”

After enjoying the fragrant aroma, Samadan went to put his lips to the teacup.

Bam!

Suddenly, the door flung open with a tremendous clatter.

“Don’t drink that, Samadan!”

Samadan was so startled that he stopped what he was doing, and his eyes widened. “Father?” he said, looking at his father, who was dripping with sweat as if he’d rushed over here as fast as possible. “What’s the matter?”

“You haven’t drunk any of that yet, have you?”

“Huh? Oh, no. I haven’t had a sip yet.”

Heaving a sigh of relief, Corundum briskly walked over and took the cup from his hands.

“Father, what’s actually going on here?” Samadan asked. “What’s the issue with the tea? Did you want to have a cup yourself?”

“You fool! This tea is poisoned!” Corundum shouted.

“Pardon?” Samadan asked, staring at his father’s face in a daze, unable to process what he’d just heard. “But this is what Orio made for me.”

“Yes, and Orio *poisoned* it.”

“Huh?” Samadan shifted his gaze from Corundum to Orio in disbelief. “Orio?”

“What are you talking about, father? You know that I would never do something so heinous.” Orio lowered his brows sadly, seeming extremely hurt

that his father would accuse him of something like that.

“Then *you* drink this,” Corundum demanded, holding out the cup that Orio had given Samadan.

That was when Orio’s sympathetic expression cracked. “I made that for brother, so I couldn’t possibly drink it.”

“That’s fine. You can always make yourself another cup. Or would you rather I force it down your throat?”

Corundum’s gaze traveled behind him, and he nudged his chin. The soldiers that came in after Corundum then grabbed both of Orio’s arms.

“Father! What do you think you’re doing?” Orio cried.

“If you drink this, then I’ll believe what you say.” Corundum then approached Orio and tilted the cup toward his mouth.



“*Stooooop!*” Orio furiously resisted, swinging his arm and knocking the cup and its contents onto the floor, soaking the carpet.

As Orio crumpled where he stood, gasping for air, Samadan looked on with a look of utter disbelief. “Orio? No, this can’t be true, right?” Unfortunately, Samadan’s wishes that this was just a big misunderstanding were washed away with another shocking accusation.

“You didn’t just try to poison Samadan. You also poisoned Adularia and Roy, didn’t you?” Corundum insisted.

“Father, there’s just no way!” protested Samadan.

“No, Orio would often bring tea to Adularia. He probably had plenty of opportunities to poison her. And when I checked with Roy, he said that you would make him tea in a similar fashion. Isn’t that right, Roy?”

Corundum then threw the conversation to the person he was looking at—Roy, who was walking in as healthy as could be.

Samadan, who’d been told that his brother was still ill, was shocked, but he was more relieved to see him up and in good health.

Orio felt otherwise. “H-How? How is he standing? It’s long past the point where he should be completely unable to move!” His words were a confession that he was the murderer.

“Sorry that you weren’t able to kill me, Orio. Thanks to there being a cure, I am fit as a fiddle, as you can plainly see,” Roy said with a bold smirk.

Orio’s face turned pale. “A cure? There *is* no cure. I thoroughly checked.”

“Oh, but there is. Her Majesty, the Queen of Yadacain, possessed the knowledge. And thanks to her, I am cured. Granted, the treatment had me wandering on the edge of death more than I care to admit,” Roy said, looking a bit peevish.

“Yes, you stuck it out in fine fashion. I surely would have run away,” Corundum added sympathetically, looking at his eldest son.

“Why...? How did you figure that out?” Orio asked.

Both Corundum and Roy sternly looked down at Orio.

“Our Lady Beloved asked the spirits to investigate for us,” Corundum explained. “It led to them finding the first person infected by the tachyotoxian venom and the doctor who was researching it. Apparently, you had that doctor teach you many things about poisons and diseases with no known cure. That doctor testified. He said you had a particular interest in the tachyotoxians. You stole the blood of that deceased patient and laced Adularia’s and Roy’s tea with it. Didn’t you?!”

Orio’s face contorted in frustration.

Samadan, the only one not really following along, was doing his best to sort out his confused thoughts. “So what you’re telling me is...*Orio* killed mother?”

“That’s right, Samadan,” Corundum confirmed.

“What kind of joke is this? Orio isn’t capable of doing such a thing. He is a kindhearted boy who we must protect—”

“That’s what infuriates me the most about all of you!” Orio suddenly shouted.

“Seize him!” Corundum ordered, and a soldier quickly hooked his arms under both of Orio’s arms.

“You’re all always like this,” Orio continued. “You always look down on me and bask in a sense of superiority! The nobles too! They only give their attention to Roy and Samadan. I’m an imperial prince too! I have the right to be emperor too! Yet no one gives me the time of day! No one thinks that I can be emperor... Not even mother did!”

“And *that* was your motive?” Roy asked, shooting a horribly cold glare at Orio.

“Yes, and what’s wrong with that? In the history of the Imperial Nation, it wasn’t that uncommon for people to assassinate their relatives in order to become emperor, was it? They’re all standing in the way of me ascending the throne. Mother, Roy, and Samadan!”

Roy stepped up to Orio and punched him as hard as humanly possible in the face, flinging Orio straight to the floor. The punch likely caused a cut as blood quickly started to pour from his mouth.

“I can’t believe you would think that. If you wanted to be emperor, you should have done it fair and square. Just as Samadan did. To think you would kill mother because of your victim complex... You are in no way fit to ascend the throne as emperor!”

“That is merely lip service. You can say that because all three of you were born with an advantage,” Orio sneered.

“The conditions remain the same. Yes, we may have been born with an advantage, being born before you, but unless you’re able to climb past that adversity, you can’t possibly serve as emperor. You went about things all wrong,” Roy said, clenching his fists in regret.

“Take him to the noble’s dungeon,” Corundum demanded.

“Yessir!” The soldiers carted Orio away per Corundum’s order.

Everyone expected Orio to thrash and resist, but he instead went along quietly, much to their surprise. That left Samadan, Roy, and Corundum all alone in the room.

“Brother...” Samadan began.

“Samadan, you didn’t drink a single drop, right?” Roy asked.

“Yes, I’m fine. But are *you* okay?”

“I’ve been pretending to be sick to throw the culprit off. And maybe it’s because I haven’t been doing any work and living like a slacker, getting so much rest, but I feel even healthier than before I fell ill.”

Once Samadan heard that, his legs buckled, and he fell to his knees. Roy and Corundum panicked.

“Hey, come on, are you all right?” asked Roy.

“Yes, I just got a little weak in the knees. I mean, I was convinced that you’d end up like mother,” Samadan said, trying his best to stifle a sob.

“I’m sorry for making you worry,” Roy replied, rustling Samadan’s head, which made Samadan feel like a child again.

“I can’t believe that Orio would kill mother.” Samadan was still hoping that his

brother or father would reveal that it was all one big practical joke, but he knew that it wasn't.

"We assumed that he would never do anything like that because he was the youngest, the most gentle, and the most timid of us," Roy said. "From Orio's perspective, he probably saw that as us looking down on him. We should reflect on that misguided assumption. Perhaps our arrogance ended up warping Orio's character."

"Yes..." Samadan trailed off, the shock of his precious younger brother trying to kill him weighing on him immensely. He then looked up at his father with an inquisitive look. "Father, what will happen to Orio?"

His father's face twisted uncomfortably. "Orio has assassinated the emperor. Even if all of you forgive his actions and we try to hide the fact that he attempted to murder two imperial princes, we cannot pretend as if what he did to Adularia never happened. Though he is an imperial prince himself, I assume I don't need to tell the both of you what the punishment is for assassinating the emperor, do I?"

Samadan and Roy both closed their eyes as they tried to suppress the bevy of emotions welling inside of them—regret, chagrin, and sadness to name a few.

"We can at least wait until Mariano returns home, can't we?" asked Samadan.

"Yes, we can," Corundum answered. "I'll call Mariano to have him return right away."

This news was bound to devastate Mariano. Samadan could not rejoice in his brother returning home, knowing that.

Where had it all gone wrong? If he could, he wanted to go back in time and do things over again. Even though he knew that was impossible, Samadan couldn't help but wish it were true.

Chapter 10: Until Things Are Resolved

When Corundum told Ruri and the others that he'd arrived in time to save the third prince, everyone breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Ruri and Jade had gone back to speak with the doctor, and when the doctor gave up Prince Orio's name, they'd found it hard to believe. They wanted to think that it was all just a big coincidence; after all, this implied that a child had killed their parent. However, the more the spirits investigated Orio, the more they found proof of his guilt.

The doctor had kept the blood sample taken from the deceased insect researcher in his locked cabinet. He'd said that he kept it more secure than anything else because his research showed how dangerous it was, but upon closer examination, he noticed a very tiny amount missing.

The doctor hadn't even realized it until Ruri's group pointed out the possibility of it being stolen. A harsh reprimand from Corundum was in his future for sure. That aside, the question remained: who stole the blood? The prime suspect was Orio given that he'd supported the doctor and had the key to the storage cabinet. The poison didn't spread through the air, but once even the slightest bit entered the body, it could exert its full, terrifying force.

Jade had collected the blood on the spot. There was no way that he was going to leave a deadly poison in the hands of someone who didn't even notice a change in the amount. He'd also told the doctor that he would be severely scolded, but whether that would be punishment enough was all up to Corundum. Even if the doctor had been unaware while it happened, someone—the emperor, no less—had still died due to his improper management.

The animals that had been given the blood for research purposes had also been dug up out of the yard and promptly burned. Jade had been outraged and had asked the doctor what he was thinking by burying them in the yard when he knew the infected blood was basically poison. Jade's aura had been so frightening that even Ruri had shrunk in fear.

The doctor had taken the full brunt of it, turning deathly pale. He probably hadn't expected this to turn into such a serious matter. It did seem as though he had the best of intentions, researching the infected blood with the hopes that it would aid people one day, but he'd dropped the ball on cleaning up after himself and judging the prince's character.

For quite some time, Orio had been passionately asking about rare illnesses, their causes, poisons with no antidote, and diseases contagious to humans. The doctor had said that he would proudly share his findings with Orio, and since Orio was a supporter and a young man in search of knowledge, it had never crossed his mind that he shouldn't tutor the young prince. It was likely that Orio had had designs to assassinate the emperor for quite some time, which was why he'd supported the doctor in the first place.

Orio's artfulness and cunning had sent shivers rolling down Ruri's spine. She'd been shocked that he had wanted to kill Adularia *that* badly.

After Ruri's group pinned Orio as the culprit, Ruri had asked Kotaro to keep an eye on him. At the same time, they'd told the whole story to Corundum, who had been blindsided by the news. No one could blame him either. It was one thing to be suspicious of his sons' involvement, but it was another to actually hear that one of them was the culprit. Corundum had figured that if any of them were involved, it would be the third prince, Samadan.

Although Jade had told Corundum that the Reaper contract might be a fake and Samadan himself had denied any involvement, suspicion inevitably fell on him because he was in a power struggle with his biggest adversary, the first prince. In contrast, the fourth prince, Orio, was so timid he barely stood out despite his royal bloodline, so he hadn't even been on Corundum's radar.

The news had been a bolt from the blue. At first, Corundum had refused to believe it despite Jade's explanation, a testament to how upstanding Orio appeared on the surface. They also had no clear-cut evidence as of yet. At the time, they'd only known that there was a tie to the tachyotoxians and that Orio knew about the dangers. It wasn't like they'd found the poison in Orio's quarters. That was why Corundum had refused to accept it: he hadn't wanted to believe it. Also, they didn't know what Orio's objectives were, so they needed conclusive proof.

Orio had apparently served Adularia tea quite often in the past, so he had numerous opportunities to poison her. It would have been great if a spirit or someone had seen him poisoning the tea, but there weren't many spirits in the Beloved-less palace, much less a spirit who conveniently caught the moment. After the first prince fell ill, the soldiers swept the entire palace, but they hadn't found any suspicious items in Orio's room.

Although they were blood brothers, the first prince couldn't manipulate mana, while Orio could, so Orio had his own pocket space. There was a chance that some proof was stored inside there, but that also meant that no one else could touch it.

While everyone pondered how they could retrieve the evidence, Ruri realized something everyone else hadn't. "Why don't I enter the pocket space and check the fourth prince's room?"

"Oh!" gasped the group. They had just remembered that Ruri could access other people's pocket spaces.

"If that's what we're going with, then I'll be right back!" Ruri said.

"Ruri, even if you find it, all you have to do is confirm that it's there. You can leave it just where it is. If you take it, then he'll have a means to weasel out," Jade asserted.

"Wait," Pearl interjected. "Ruri, you wouldn't know what the tachyotoxian-infected blood even looked like, would you?"

"You're right. I wouldn't," Ruri answered, possessing neither medical knowledge nor tachyotoxian knowledge.

"Hey, you, lizard. Give me my dropper and a vial."

"Yes, ma'am. Right away, ma'am," Quartz replied with a wry smile as he pulled out a vial and eyedropper from his pocket space and handed it to Pearl. It seemed that Quartz was Pearl's personal luggage carrier now.

Pearl then handed the equipment to Ruri and said, "Get a sample of the blood into this vial—any little drop will do—and make sure he doesn't notice you. But *do not* touch it with your bare hands. Make sure to use the dropper."

“Roger that!” Ruri said with a salute before jumping into the pocket space.

As usual, Ruri’s space was cluttered with an assortment of different items. The majority of them she’d inherited from Lydia’s previous contract-bearer, Weidt, the first Dragon King, but there were quite a few things that Lydia had brought over from other people’s rooms. Ruri had thought of organizing the piles, but she always left them as is since she had room to spare. Also, the number of things was ever increasing, so it was difficult to figure out where to even start.

Ruri figured that she would follow in Weidt’s footsteps and dump—no, *bestow*—these items on Lydia’s next contract-bearer after she died. Her idea was definitely not influenced by the fact that it was a pain in the butt to properly sort through everything—not according to what Ruri told herself to make herself feel better, at least.

“Lydia, are you here~?” Ruri called, and Lydia immediately appeared. “Lydia, I hate to be so abrupt, but I need a little favor.”

“Yes, Water and Wind filled me in on all of the details. You want to see the fourth prince’s space.”

“Wow, that spirit communication ability really comes in handy. I’m glad I can cut straight to the chase. Do you know which pocket space it is?” There were as many spaces as the number of people who’d created them, and Ruri couldn’t pinpoint a specific person’s space among them on her own.

“Tee hee hee, who do you think I am?”

Lydia let out a tiny chuckle and snapped her fingers. As soon as she did, Ruri found herself on the spiral staircase. This was the reverse side of the spatial dimension, a special place that only Lydia and her contract-bearers could enter. Here, there were a multitude of doors that led to other people’s pocket spaces. With another snap of Lydia’s fingers, Ruri was teleported to a glowing door. The glow meant that the owner was still alive, so she was in front of a living person’s room.

“This is the room of the fourth imperial prince?” Ruri asked.

“Yes. It’s just that simple,” Lydia explained.

The wicked thought of entering anyone's room if she just asked Lydia crossed Ruri's mind. She could only imagine what the fourth prince would think if he knew that someone was perusing his personal pocket space—a domain that no one should be able to investigate—right under his nose. If it were Ruri, she would point fingers and cry foul, even going as far as to call it deceitful. However, it was a necessary evil in this instance to ensure that there were no further casualties.

Ruri suppressed her guilt and opened the door. The space was so small that it couldn't even be compared to Ruri's. Ruri knew that this was a normal size, though, because she would sometimes help Lydia sort through the deceased's rooms. The size of an individual's room depended on their mana reserves, which meant that Ruri's mana reserves were just abnormally massive. Fortunately, the fact that this room was small made Ruri's job easier.

Orio's space was filled with many vials containing all sorts of liquid. Though it would've been helpful if one of them was clearly labeled "Tachyotoxian Poison," Ruri had no idea which vial contained the evidence. Seeing as how she was looking for blood, she focused on finding a red liquid, but there were actually several vials of red liquid, and all of them were indistinguishable from one another. She was completely stymied.

Ruri stood in front of the vials and groaned. "Hmm... Hey, Lydia. Do you know which of these has the tachyotoxian-infected blood?"

"I don't have that direct knowledge on hand myself," Lydia answered, which made sense considering that she couldn't leave the world of space. Her only source of information was the spirits on the outside. *"Hold on. I'll check with Water."*

"Okay," Ruri uttered, waiting patiently as Lydia closed her eyes and remained silent.

Lydia was likely exchanging information with Rin on the outside. While it would have been quicker if Rin or Kotaro had come with her, just as Lydia couldn't go to the outside, outside spirits couldn't enter the space. Ruri had no idea why this was, but the notion wasn't very surprising. If outside spirits could enter, Lydia wouldn't have been so lonely all this time.

Besides, Ruri had been told that it was the rule. If she complained, it would just make Lydia feel awkward, although Ruri did wonder who came up with such a restriction. If that being existed, she wanted to give them a stern talking to.

After a few moments, Lydia opened her eyes, signifying that she was done communicating.

“Did you find out, Lydia?” Ruri asked.

“Yes, more or less.” Lydia nudged her finger in the direction of the room’s interior, and a vial floated through the air and stopped in front of Ruri. *“This should be what you’re looking for.”*

“Thank you, Lydia!” Ruri exclaimed, taking the vial. She saw that it had a tiny bit of red liquid within. “It’s not as much as I thought. He’ll find out if I take too much, so I’ll just take a smidgen.”

Pearl had told Ruri to only take a drop, but Ruri felt that even that much would tip the fourth prince off. Carefully removing the top so as to not touch the contents, Ruri used the dropper to collect the blood and squirted it into the vial Pearl had given her. She then had Lydia return the vial of blood to its original spot.

“You seem to be in a rush. Are you leaving already?”

“Sorry, Lydia. When this matter is resolved, I’ll buy some yummy snacks and we can have a nice tea party with Seraphie-san.”

“I’ll look forward to it, then.” Lydia waved goodbye to Ruri.

Ruri waved back and exited the space. A crowd huddled around her, as if they were eagerly awaiting her return.

“How did it go, Ruri?” Jade asked. He was the first to approach her.

Showing off her spoils, Ruri replied, “This was in the fourth prince’s pocket space.” She then handed the vial to Pearl.

“Very well. Wait a second. I’ll check it out,” said Pearl before she left the room. Not long after, she came back with a grim look on her face, saying with certainty that she was holding tachyotoxian-infected blood.

“So it’s proof, then?” asked Ruri.

“Yes, it is. Corundum, do you still refute what you hear?” Jade inquired, sternly staring at Corundum.

Corundum hung his head. “This can’t be...”

“Grieve later. Fulfill your duty now. With Adularia gone, you must.”

“Yes...”

While everyone could sympathize with the disheartened Corundum, it was his job to give the final word.

“I’ll go talk to Roy first,” Corundum said. “I’m sure he will find it hard to believe at first, as I did, but...” He then walked out of the room and farther down the hall until he was out of sight.

As everyone silently stewed in their conflicted emotions, a few of the spirits who’d been trailing Orio came back to the room.

“Um, he put in somethin’ weird!”

“Yeah, weird. It went ‘drip drip’ as it fell.”

Ruri cocked her head in confusion, unable to follow because the spirits hadn’t named who they were talking about. “Who put what in where?”

“Um, that fourth prince guy~!”

“So, like, he was preparing tea in a pot.”

“And then he put some red stuff in it!”

“Do you know what it was?” asked Ruri.

“It was the blood with that bug’s venom you were talking about!”

Tension gripped the room.

“Where is the fourth prince now?”

“Um, let’s see...” the spirit trailed off, possibly corresponding with the other spirits tailing Orio. Times like this were when the spirit’s telepathic communication shone.

“He made tea and he’s on the move.”

“To where?”

“He’s telling the people around him that he’s off to ‘brother’s’ room. I wonder who this brother guy is,” the spirit said in an adorable manner, but Ruri and the others had no time to admire that now.

“Jade-sama.” Ruri turned to face Jade, who had panic written all over his face.

“The first prince can’t accept visitors due to his illness, so the only other person in the palace he could call his brother is the third prince,” Jade surmised. The second prince was away in the neighboring country.

“Don’t tell me he’s trying to poison the third prince as well?” Quartz asked, panic coming through in his voice.

“Finn, hurry and inform Corundum!” Jade ordered with a sense of urgency.

“Sire!” Finn yelped as he scrambled down the hall.

“Let’s go interrupt him!” Ruri cried. She was about to set off, but Jade grabbed her by the arm and stopped her. “Jade-sama?”

“This is actually our chance. He’s basically bringing the evidence to us. We have to leave this to Corundum.”

“I agree with Jade,” Quartz chimed in. “This is a great opportunity to catch him red-handed.”

This left Ruri without any role to play. “Awww, but I’m so curious!” she whined, hugging Kotaro’s fluffy body to calm her overwhelming worries. Pearl, on the other hand, was calm. Ruri respected and expected that from someone with the moniker of queen.

“Fear not,” Pearl said, her lips curled into a proud smile. “Even if he should drink that tea, I still have enough ingredients for the antidote. I’ll make sure to pump it down his throat till he’s cured.”

Her words were extremely reassuring, even though it meant that a certain amount of hell awaited the third prince, Samadan. Whether he was bound for a three-day mandatory tour of the netherworld’s dark depths was all dependent on Corundum making it to him in time.

Ruri, as well as others in the room, sincerely prayed for Corundum to

intervene—for Samadan’s sake.



As it turned out, the third prince didn’t have to take a tour through hell after all. Pearl seemed somewhat disappointed, but the less said about that, the better. Orio was apprehended, but he went peacefully, and he honestly answered questions during his interrogation, stating that he’d always been dissatisfied with his older brothers.

Orio had been raised relatively free because he had three prodigy brothers ahead of him. He hadn’t received a strict education like they had. According to Orio, he was worried that their educational plan for him was training him to one day lower himself to the likes of a vassal.

Orio was qualified to be emperor himself, but his eldest brother, Roy, was the closest to gaining the throne, with the third eldest, Samadan, behind him. The second eldest would be a ruler elsewhere even if he didn’t become emperor. Everyone had high hopes for the three brothers.

But where did that leave Orio? No one paid attention to him or had hopes for him, so his title of imperial prince was the only thing he had. The nobles were only interested in Roy and Samadan, although Orio himself was an imperial prince as well. He’d felt as though he was being ignored in the grand scheme of things, and he’d started to wish that his older brothers would just go away. That said, they weren’t going to just conveniently vanish.

That was when Orio met with a former palace doctor who treated the sick for cheap in a small clinic. More importantly, this doctor also researched cures for diseases deemed incurable. Possibly because of his time serving in the palace, he had a vast knowledge of poisons—all sorts, from all sorts of areas. Thinking he could use this to his advantage, Orio had enticed the doctor with his support and asked for his tutelage.

Orio had been looking for a poison known by few and immune to antidotes. That was around the time he’d come across the blood of a man who’d died from the venom of a tachyotoxian insect.

The insect’s venom contained a terrifying toxin that could kill a person with a single drop and that was immune to all antidotes, medicines, and treatments.

Orio himself didn't know anything about the tachyotoxians, but he also didn't care either. The venom was tasteless and odorless, so he could easily slip the infected blood into tea. It would take a little time for the symptoms to show too, thus making it harder to identify the perpetrator.

All in all, it was the best solution that Orio could find, so he'd stolen a small amount of the blood from the storage cabinet it was kept in. The doctor couldn't utilize a pocket pace because he didn't have any mana, so the blood was there for the taking and ripe for Orio to pilfer.

The rest was easy. Orio had put a drop in Adularia's tea for a few days and made her drink it. From there, it had taken several days before the symptoms started to appear. No one had known that the tea Orio was serving his mother had been poisoned. All that was left was to wait for Adularia to die, and so she did, just as Orio had hoped.

Orio's next targets were his two elder brothers. He didn't care which one he took care of first, but since Roy had visited him to check on him after the death of their mother, Orio had used that as his chance to poison him. That was the only reason he'd gone after his eldest brother first—no more, no less. His brothers had assumed that Orio was shocked by his mother's death and was holing himself up, which was the exact impression that Orio had wanted to give them. He *couldn't* be in shock; he was the one who'd done it.

Orio had left clues hinting at the Reapers near his mother's bedside and in Samadan's room to confuse people. This had brought suspicion on Samadan, but Orio didn't think it would keep Samadan from the throne. While Orio intended on ultimately killing both, when he heard of the eldest falling ill, he'd figured that his time was near, so he'd simply set his sights on his next target.

Fortunately, Orio's perfectly orchestrated crimes all came quickly crumbling down just before the finish line. If it hadn't been for the combined efforts of Ruri, Quartz, and Pearl, Orio would have likely become emperor, and the truth would have been buried in darkness forever.

Once Corundum told Ruri the details, she shuddered at Orio's ruthless and callous nature. He held no reservations about murder. Who ever said that he was timid and gentle? He was the total opposite of that.

“Anyway, what is going to happen to Orio?” Ruri asked, curious.

“We cannot let the scandal of his killing the emperor go public,” Corundum replied. “We will give him poison and officially say that he died of an illness.”

“I see...” Orio had assassinated the emperor, so it was only natural that he would be given a punishment deserving of his crime.

“However, that will wait until the second prince arrives back home. We are arranging to bring him back from the neighboring nation as soon as possible,” Corundum explained. He thought it possible that the second prince would want to see his younger brother one last time.

Corundum bowed deeply to Ruri and the others, but he especially praised Pearl, the savior of Roy’s life. “I apologize for any inconvenience this may have caused you. Thank you very much for your cooperation.”

Pearl grinned with satisfaction. “It’s fine. This was the first time I used the antidote on a human subject. Served as good research material. I actually wanted at least one more subject, but that’s the way the cookie crumbles, I suppose.”

Corundum grimaced. For her first time curing a live human, she sure hadn’t hesitated to make Roy guzzle down her concoction. What would have happened if she had failed? You could say, in a certain sense, that Pearl was just as ruthless as Orio.

Corundum reproachfully glared at Quartz, the man responsible for bringing Pearl in the first place.

“Well, she healed him, and that’s all that matters, right?” Quartz quickly commented before fleeing the room.

“This has been quite the ordeal, but now that matters are settled, we should get back to the Nation of the Dragon King,” Jade stated, patting Ruri’s head with a relieved look in his eyes.

“Yes, I agree. I have a feeling that Euclase-san will give us grief if we don’t get back home soon,” Ruri added. The chancellor, interim ruler of the nation, was most likely impatiently awaiting Jade’s return.

The party from the Nation of the Dragon King readied their things and left the Imperial Nation not long after. Once they drew near the nation, Quartz headed toward Yadacain in order to drop off Pearl and her ladies-in-waiting. While everyone assumed that he would come right back, Quartz said that he was going to learn how to make the tachyotoxian antidote in case an incident like Seraphie's ever happened again. His plan was to bring the knowledge back home and pass it on to the doctors in the Nation of the Dragon King. From there, he wanted to share it with the other allied nations and have them proliferate it to other nations as well.

Ruri debated whether it was safe to spread a medicine with such a hellish taste across the world, but considering that was the only way to cure the poisoning, it had to be done. She just hoped that someone, *anyone*, would come along and improve the recipe.

Chapter 11: Return Home

Ruri returned to the Nation of the Dragon King, back to the castle she had missed so much, which filled her with a sense of nostalgia.

“It feels like I’ve been away for a whole year. Don’t you feel the same, Jade-sama?” she asked.

“Yes. Quite a lot happened in the Imperial Nation,” Jade started, looking somewhat pensive. “I can only assume the nation will fall into disarray.”

“Over who will become the emperor out of the first and third prince?”

“Indeed. For Adularia’s sake, I hope they figure out a successor without conflict, but if the nobles are butting heads with one another already, then I’m afraid not even the imperial princes can stop them.”

While Jade was in the empire, he had asked Kotaro to keep him informed about the Imperial Nation’s nobles. They had formed two opposing factions, and one wrong move could spark a civil war.

“Adularia should have named her successor earlier. That point alone may tarnish her legacy, putting her in the history books as a foolish emperor whose actions sparked a war. That would be dreadful,” Jade lamented, knowing how good of a ruler Adularia was.

As Jade sadly reflected on recent events, Ruri held his hand, unsure of what else she could do in this situation.

“The Imperial Nation’s future does fill me with concern,” Jade continued, “but as the Dragon King, I can’t interfere in the matter. If I did, it would only lead to unnecessary strife. I’ll just place my faith in Corundum and the imperial princes. They are Adularia’s sons. I want to believe they’ll handle this in a civil manner.”

“Yes, me too,” Ruri agreed.



As Jade predicted, the war for succession intensified. Deciding who would be

the next emperor was not an easy process, but after dragging many nobles into the conflict, the first prince's faction stood victorious, giving rise to Emperor Roy.

It took many years for this to happen, though, which left the empire's government in shambles. The new emperor began his reign by attempting to rebuild it, but he favored the old nobles and their ways and often ignored the burgeoning nobles. The third prince acted as a go-between for the emperor and those nobles, and while they repeated a few past mistakes along the way, the two brothers managed to rebuild the empire. Unfortunately, some distance developed between them and the nobles as a result, and as time passed and Emperor Roy passed the throne to the next generation, the barely functioning semblance of balance ended up collapsing.

Roy's son, now the new emperor, lacked the power needed to coordinate and lead the nobles. The government became corrupt, and the people's sentiments deteriorated. After that, the imperial prince, Roy's grandson, became the next emperor, saving the nation. Also a Beloved, he purged the corrupt nobles from the government and brought the nation back to its rightful status—but that is a story for another time.



Ruri went to Euclase's office, and as soon as she stepped inside, Gibeon's face lit up, and he happily ran toward her. If he had a tail like Kotaro, it would be wagging.

"My sweet Ruri~!" he shouted, his arms open wide.

Jade, who was standing next to Ruri, swung his sword, but the barrier around Gibeon deflected it.

"Tch." Jade clicked his tongue, looking genuinely disappointed. Gibeon, on the other hand, stood frozen in fear from almost being cut in half.

"Yeek! What are you doing, Mr. Dragon King?! Trying to cut me down as soon as you see me?! Are you some kind of psychopath?! Why don't you just change your name from 'Dragon King' to 'Drake the Ripper'?!"

"I'm keeping you away from *my* Ruri, you ignoramus," Jade asserted.

Jade's face always turned a little surly when dealing with Gibeon. It made perfect sense, though; Gibeon was trying to hit on his mate, which made him an enemy in Jade's eyes. For those familiar with dragonkin, it was a miracle that Gibeon was still in one piece. If he wasn't blessed by the Spirit of Light, his head would have long since been estranged from his body.

Euclase, who was watching the two cause a commotion outside of their office, heaved a heavy sigh. "Gibeon, that's enough merrymaking with His Majesty. I need to discuss business."

"Right-o!" Gibeon trilled and took off.

"In any case, welcome back, Your Majesty. You had quite the long stay."

"Yes. I never would have thought that matters with Adularia would become such a huge fiasco," Jade remarked.

"We can discuss the future of the Imperial Nation with the rest of the court little by little, but in the meantime..." Euclase placed a mountain of papers in front of Jade. "You've amassed quite a number of documents that require your approval, so I hope you see to them quickly."

It wasn't only Gibeon; Euclase was also pretty rough with Jade.

"All of these?" Jade asked, a frown forming on his face.

"Indeed. And until these are done, you are prohibited from any hanky-panky with Ruri."

"Euclase... I'll remind you in case you've forgotten, but we are *newlyweds*."

"Oh, I'm quite aware. Which means you should hurry and handle your business so you can get back to your honeymoon shenanigans," Euclase said, smiling sweetly. With that winning smile, Euclase was a beauty who could enchant anyone.

As Jade slumped and slunk to his office, Ruri went to go check on someone she had been curious about during her entire stay in the Imperial Nation—Sango. Some time had passed since she'd started working in the castle. It would be the first time Ruri met her in person since Sango launched her accusations at her.

At the time, Rutile had asked to take care of Sango and walked her away, but Ruri had no idea what had happened after that incident. According to Euclase, it was safe to see her again. Maybe she had some sort of change of heart, but Ruri wouldn't know how Sango had changed without meeting her in person.

As Ruri walked toward the training grounds in Sector Five in order to search for Rutile, she spotted someone walking toward her from the opposite direction. It was none other than Sango. It seemed that she'd earned everyone's trust in the time Ruri was away, because she was now allowed in Sector Five. Of course, she hadn't been given entry all the way to Sector One, the sector reserved for royalty and Beloveds, but by being allowed to enter a place where Ruri often visited, the training grounds in Sector Five, it meant that Sango was no longer deemed a dangerous individual.

Sango gasped, noticing Ruri as well. Ruri walked closer, nervously hoping that Sango wouldn't be belligerent, but Sango made a beeline straight to Ruri. Ruri started to panic when she noticed that the spirits around her were taking fighting stances because of Sango's previous offense, but Sango came right up to her and squeezed both of Ruri's hands.

"Thank you. I have you to thank for everything," Sango exclaimed.

"*Huh?*" Ruri gasped, puzzled as to why Sango was thanking her.

Sango, with stars in her eyes, said, "I'm sorry for everything I did. I felt I needed to apologize to you the next time I saw you. After all, that's what *milady* said I should do."

"Milady?"

"Yes, that's right. Milady, the one who dashingly came to my rescue. Aah... I can't believe what a wonderful individual she is. I thought I came to this world in order to become a Beloved, but after coming to this castle and meeting milady, I have been hit with a bolt of revelation. It told me that I've come to this world to worship milady and tell the people of this world of her splendor!"

"U-Uh, right..." Ruri listlessly replied. She couldn't keep up with Sango's story. Who was this "milady" in the first place?

"I'm so sorry," Sango added. "I'm not jealous of you anymore. I've got

something even *more* incredible than the title of Beloved.”

“Oh, that’s nice...”

“I wanted to come to Sector Five in order to see milady, but I was told that I couldn’t because I could possibly try to hurt you. But the lady that is friends with milady said that they would allow me if I apologize to you, so I’ve changed my ways. I will not do anything to you anymore. After all, milady said that you are her mistress and she’s sworn to protect you. And if you’re her mistress, then you’re *my* master. Please let me call you ‘mistress’ from now on!”

“Huh? Um, I don’t think so...” Ruri uttered. She was already weirded out enough by being called “Lady Beloved,” and she wasn’t keen on someone younger than her calling her “mistress.”

“Oh my, really? Then what should I call you?” Sango asked.

“Just Ruri is fine.”

Sango smiled sweetly and squeezed Ruri’s hands. “Okay, Ruri-sama, then. You can call me Sango. We’re from the same world, so let’s be friends.”

As Ruri stood staring at Sango in shock, a voice from out of sight asked, “What are you doing?”

They both turned to face the familiar voice. Just as expected, there was Rutile, clad in her military outfit.

Sango let go of Ruri’s hands and let out a shrill cry. “Eeek! Milady!”

Sango was so excited that she resembled a puppy who had been waiting for their master to come home. This was probably the same kind of overjoyed reaction Ewan would give Finn upon his return.

“Sango, you haven’t been trying to pull anything funny on Ruri, have you?” Rutile questioned.

“Of course not, milady! I have apologized for what I’ve done just as I should. You scolded me enough that I wouldn’t dare do otherwise!” she said with an oddly braggadocian air. Her comment wasn’t something to brag about, but she appeared to be very serious about what she said.

“Really?” Rutile asked Ruri.

“Yes,” Ruri confirmed with a nod. “She apologized.” She at least appeared to be sorry for what she did, so Ruri decided not to interject with anything else.

“I see. I’m proud that you were able to apologize.” Rutile smiled and gently patted the girl on the head for a job well done.

“Aah... You pet my head. I will never wash my hair again,” Sango said, entranced and blushing.

Ruri wanted to warn her not to do that, but she was reluctant after seeing the truly elated look on Sango’s face. She was talking like a fan who had shaken hands with an idol. Never in Ruri’s wildest dreams did she imagine that Sango would become so infatuated with Rutile. Now she understood what Jade meant when he’d said that Rutile was a flirt. If she was able to change a person to this extent, it might be better to call her an enchantress.

Ruri was curious about what kind of conversation had transpired between the two in order to come to this point. She wanted to ask, but at the same time, she didn’t want to. Either way, it was clear that Sango wasn’t going to be picking fights with Ruri anymore.

“I’m relieved to see that Sango is on good terms with you now, Ruri. After the incident, she realized the error of her ways and repented for her actions,” Rutile explained.

“Yes, but that is because you sat with me and kindly listened to my woes, milady,” Sango added.

“You’ve started to take your work seriously, and you’re on friendly terms with your coworkers.”

“All because you give me praise when I put forth effort. And I’ve become friends with my coworkers because we all share a common interest—you, milady.”

Sango’s cheeks turned red whenever Rutile praised her.

A badge sewn on Sango’s uniform caught Ruri’s eyes. “What’s that?”

“Oh this? It’s a badge that members of the Milady Fan Club have,” Sango answered.

“Fan Club?”

“That’s right. It’s a club for people who know how wonderful milady is. We’re currently recruiting new members, but we can’t keep up with making these badges. Word has been going from person to person, and over half of the girls in the castle are asking to join. That’s milady for you. Oh, by the way, I’m president and, of course, I’m number one. I won’t give this seat up to anyone.”



“Hmmm. Well, for better or worse, you certainly took a turn in an unexpected direction,” Ruri remarked.

Sango seemed the type to get along with Ewan. Well, perhaps not. Ewan loved Finn, and Sango loved Rutile. They were like oil and water, in a sense, so mixing them might be dangerous.

“Ruri-sama, do you want to join the fan club? Tee hee hee hee. Just in case, I made sure to save the number two badge just for you to prove that we’ve buried the hatchet,” Sango said, holding out the badge to Ruri.

Ruri gratefully accepted it.

“I can’t give up the role of president, not even to you, so you’ll be the vice president. Let’s grow our numbers together!” Sango exclaimed.

Ruri nodded, and the two exchanged a firm handshake.

Epilogue

A few days had passed since Ruri returned, and time rolled by so peacefully that everything that transpired in the Imperial Nation seemed like it had never happened.

The first thing that Ruri decided to do was have a tea party with Lydia. Ruri had actually wanted to go into the imperial capital and buy some local sweets for them to eat together, but the trip hadn't provided an opportunity for a casual sightseeing romp through the capital, so it ended in a bust.

It was right after the entire debacle went down, so even if she had been allowed to go out and about, she wouldn't have been able to enjoy the experience. The war over the throne was on the cusp of breaking down the government, and it seemed a bad idea to venture out into the nation until things had calmed down. Jade probably wouldn't have allowed her anyway, seeing as how much of a fiasco it would have been if Ruri had gotten involved in their affairs. Neither wanted any more bloodshed if they could help it.

With that in mind, Ruri figured it had been enough time, so she decided to go into the capital to buy some snacks. She tried to leave the castle, but Jade wouldn't give her permission. She knew that the dragonkin had a habit of wanting their mates within eyeshot at all times, but she saw no harm in stepping out for a second. Jade, however, was jealous after finding out that Gibeon had tagged along on her last trip into the capital when it was supposed to be just her and Rutile. His narrow-minded reason for not letting her go was because he didn't want Gibeon sneaking off with her again.

Ruri very well couldn't ignore Jade's pettiness and leave anyway, but fearing the consequences of showing up to a tea party empty-handed, she reluctantly had the castle cooks prepare a large selection of snacks, which she took with her into the pocket space.

Inside, Ruri placed the snacks on a nearby table and started preparing the tea. That was when Lydia appeared out of nowhere.

“Welcome, Ruri,” Lydia said with a cheery smile, happy that Ruri had come to hold a tea party just as she’d promised.

“Unfortunately, Seraphie-san is off with Quartz-sama in Yadacain, so it’ll just be us today,” Ruri informed her.

“I see. But a tea party for two is still plenty exciting. When is Seraphie due back?”

“Hmm, they didn’t tell me when, but I’m guessing it’ll be a while.”

“Oh, well, I can’t wait to hear how it went when she comes back.”

Lydia excitedly sat down in her chair, and Ruri placed a cup of piping hot tea in front of her.

“Heh heh, it smells great.”

“I couldn’t go out and buy any snacks in the Imperial Nation, but I did get some tea leaves in the imperial palace. It has a slightly different aroma from the tea in this nation, but it’s delicious, so I wanted you to try it.”

“Thank you.” With a sweet smile, Lydia took a sip. Her smile widened. *“It is delicious.”*

“I’m glad to hear that you like it,” Ruri said, taking her seat and beginning their private party.

Their conversation naturally funneled into what had happened in the Imperial Nation.

“It seems you got yourself wrapped up in another fine mess, Ruri,” Lydia pointed out.

“Well, ha ha ha...”

The sacred beast kidnapping in the Nation of the Spirit King, this murder and attempted murder in the Imperial Nation—if one looked back, they would find a litany of other issues that Ruri had been embroiled in. Ruri could only laugh about it.

“But that’s not all *my* fault, you know?” she said.

“Be that as it may, I can’t help but feel that you easily attract trouble.”

“Well, I can’t deny that...”

“This is a double warning, what with your penchant for trouble, but I advise you to stay away from the Imperial Nation for some time.”

“Are things *that* bad?” Ruri asked.

“I’m not too familiar with human matters, but the spirits outside have been talking. They say the nation is heading in a bad direction. The spirits see a lot of things, so their hunches are usually right. I would be careful.”

“Okay, I will.”

“If a Beloved like you got wrapped up in their affairs, it would make the spirits go berserk. Wind would quite literally cause a storm.”

Ruri could just picture Kotaro snapping with Rin by his side, egging him on.

“Don’t underestimate a supreme-level spirit,” Lydia warned. *“One could destroy a whole kingdom in the span of three minutes if they felt so inclined.”*

“Three minutes? There’s cup ramen that takes longer.” Ruri said.

She was again reminded that supreme-level spirits were indeed dangerous beings. It also made her wonder how in the world Riccia had spooked the supreme-level Spirit of Fire into submission.

“Well, I think I’ll be all right, considering I’ll be taking it easy in the castle for a while. Jade-sama won’t let me go outside, anyway,” Ruri explained.

Jade had promised to go around the city with her when he finished work, but when she peeked into his office a few seconds ago, she’d seen a mountain of paperwork on his desk that looked unlikely to decrease any time soon. Considering that Jade couldn’t go anywhere until all of his work was finished, it would likely be a while before they could go out.

“Oh yeah,” Ruri said, remembering something she had to tell Lydia. “Quartz-sama asked me to place the blood I put in here the other day and the blood from the fourth prince’s pocket space in his own space for research purposes.”

The blood of the insect researcher that Ruri had collected from the doctor in the Imperial Nation had been stored in Ruri’s space, and Quartz had requested that she collect the blood that the fourth prince had stashed away. Knowing

that Ruri could step into other people's pocket spaces, Quartz had asked her to place both vials in his own space because he wanted to use it in his tachyotoxian medicine research. Pearl was used to handling the extremely toxic blood, so no one was opposed to the idea of it being used to study a cure.

"I see. Okay, then. I just need to put it in Quartz's space, right?" Lydia asked.

"Yep, if you could. It'd be an invasion of privacy to go into a still-living person's room, so I probably shouldn't go in," Ruri stated, curious about the contents of Quartz's pocket space but also dreading the consequences of venturing in. "Ah, but Seraphie-san can also go into Quartz-sama's room, so we could have our three-person tea party after all."

"Oh, that is true."

"I'll ask Quartz-sama if we can use his room when I get back outside."

"Yes, good idea. The more the merrier," Lydia said with a delighted smile.

Her plan set, Ruri decided to work on writing a letter right away.



After Ruri concluded her tea party with Lydia, she went to Jade's office. Upon entering the room, she saw Jade at his desk with pen in hand, filling out the papers that buried his entire desk. He looked weary from all the work he'd been doing.

"Yikes. I'm guessing that you're far from done?" Ruri asked.

While dragonkin had keen senses, Jade unexpectedly hadn't noticed Ruri come into the room, so when Ruri started speaking to him, his head jerked up in surprise. He then stood up so fast that he kicked his seat away from him and pulled Ruri into a tight, tight embrace.

"Whoa! Jade-sama! Don't squeeze so hard! I'm gonna die! I'm gonna *die!*" Ruri tapped on his arms to signify that he was hugging too hard.

Jade loosened his grip. As Ruri sighed in relief, Jade looked at her sternly and said, "Please, Ruri. Turn into a cat. I'm dying for my cuddle fix."

His face was so determined that it looked like he was about to propose to her all over again, but he ended up proposing for cuddles.

Ruri sighed in disappointment. “Okay, okay. I get the picture.”

Ruri exasperatedly put her bracelet on, figuring that if she couldn’t help Jade with his work directly, she could at least help ease his mind. In the blink of an eye, she transformed into a white cat. Jade scooped her up, and his cheeks rose into a warm smile.

“*Aaah, my first cuddle session in so long,*” Jade mumbled as he petted Ruri’s fluffy fur, letting his fingers soak in the cuddly goodness.

“*Jade-sama, you really are a handsome man with handsome shortcomings,*” Ruri commented, her eyes half open as she accepted his gentle strokes. “*So, tell me, Jade-sama, which do you like better? Me as a cat or me as a human?*”

“What are you talking about? Of course, I like you as...” Jade started, trailing off into total silence.

“*Like me as...what?*”

“E-Erm, like you as... Err...” Jade stammered, his eyes drifting.

Ruri was hoping that he would quickly reply that he preferred her as his human wife, but it seemed he couldn’t tell a lie. He was cursed with honesty.

After giving Jade the stink eye, she quickly slipped from his arms.

“Ah, Ruri!”

“*Jade-sama, you’re on a cuddle ban!*” Ruri declared.

Jade’s mouth practically hit the floor as he reached out his hand. “No way! Please wait! Give me another chance! I swear I’ll make the right choice this time!” Jade pleaded like he was trying to reconcile from a bad breakup, though the actual matter at hand wasn’t severe. He was just that distraught over not being able to touch that sweet, sweet fur.

“*If you like cats more than me, then I’ll just send the bracelet to Celestine-san. She can turn into a cat, and you can cuddle her all you want.*”

“Wait, no. I only want *you* as a cat. If I were approached by any other cat... Well, I’d be happy, truth be told, but *you*, Ruri? You make me even more happy. Also, dealing with Celestine would be a pain in the neck,” Jade added, trying to dig himself out of his hole, but he only buried himself a little deeper.

"Then are you saying I'm disposable?" Ruri questioned.

"No, no, no. I'm not saying that at all. I love cats, but I wouldn't cuddle Celestine!"

"Really, now? In that case, I'll try it with Celestine-san. You won't pet her even if you are starved for cuddles, right?"

"Uh... Of course not?"

"Why did you pause like that?! You don't care so long as it's a cat, do you?! I want a divorce! Divorce!"

"No, you can't do that!"

Just then, the door swung open and Euclase entered the room. "Your Majesty! Why aren't you working?! You still have much more to do!"

"Wait, Euclase. Now isn't the time for that. I'm on the verge of divorce," Jade cried.

"And the nation is on the verge of anarchy. If you're going to divorce, then do it *after* you've finished your work!"

"Who said we were going to divorce?! I'm trying to prevent that! No way will I ever get a divorce!"

"A fine thing for a cheater to say! Jade-sama, you're a cheating louse!" Ruri declared.

"You're wrong, Ruri! I haven't cheated with anyone yet!"

"'Yet'?! Does that mean you intend on cheating later?!"

"No, it doesn't! How did you get that idea?!" Jade was so flustered that the more he tried to explain himself, the deeper he sank into the quagmire.



Looking through the gap in the door, Rin and Kotaro both made weary expressions.

“It looks like they’re fighting, but they seem to be having fun,” Kotaro said.

“Apparently there’s a saying in Ruri’s land that not even a dog will nibble at a marital quarrel,” Rin added.

“Hm? Of course a dog wouldn’t nibble at it. There’s nothing to nibble at. What do you mean by that?” asked Kotaro.

“Don’t read too far into it. I’m just saying that the Nation of the Dragon King is a lot more peaceful than the Imperial Nation.”

The two spirits continued to watch Ruri and the others with a tepid gaze.

Side Story: Rutile and Finn

After staying in the Imperial Nation for several years, Rutile had returned to the Nation of the Dragon King. Many women had wept in delight at the news, but despite boasting overwhelming support from the ladies of the land, Rutile had a fiancé named Finn.

Various rumors were floating around about their relationship. Some said Finn, a straitlaced and extremely earnest man, fell in love with Rutile's valor and wooed her. Others said that Rutile fell in love with Finn at first sight and went after him herself. Some said that Quartz had orchestrated the meeting behind the scenes, and some said that the two were merely pretending to be engaged because they were mutually fed up with people asking them for their hands in marriage.

Both Rutile and Finn understood that the rumor mill was turning because of their extended engagement, but they had no plans of getting married just yet. They had a fine relationship, though, contrary to what the rumors insisted.

"Hold on just a moment. You're not going on a date dressed like *that*, are you?" Euclase called with a look of disbelief.

Although they worked in different departments, Rutile and Euclase were close friends, having started working for the kingdom at the same time. At a glance, Rutile's candid personality and Euclase's more reserved feminine mindset seemed like polar opposites, but they got along surprisingly well. Despite seemingly having nothing in common aside from the fact that they started their jobs at the same time, the two would often go out drinking together.

Because of that, Euclase knew that Rutile had date plans with Finn today for the first time in years, but Euclase looked at Rutile's choice in outfit with extreme displeasure.

"Is it bad?" Rutile asked.

"Of course it is! Your first date in years and you're *not* dressed with some

style?!” Euclase spat back.

Rutile looked down at her own outfit. She was in slacks, something she was comfortable in from wearing her uniform on a daily basis, and a striped shirt. The maids had said it was a good fit for Rutile’s tall, slender body, so she’d worn it in hopes that it would be okay, but it seemed as though it wasn’t. Honestly, being “stylish” was not something that Rutile excelled at.

“It’s Finn. He doesn’t pay attention to things like that,” Rutile noted.

“What are you talking about? No man would be unhappy to see their fiancée all dressed up. I was right to come here to assess the situation. Bring yourself over here for a second!”

“Wait a second. It’s almost time for my date and...”

Euclase then flagged down a nearby soldier. “Hey, you there. Go tell Finn that she is going to be late!”

“R-Right away!” yelped the soldier, intimidated by Euclase so much that he fled as fast as he could. Did he even know where Finn was in the first place?

Assuming that the soldier would figure it out, Euclase took Rutile by the hand. She went along quietly; having known Euclase for a long time, Rutile knew that it was best to follow Euclase’s orders when they were in this mood.

After Euclase dragged her to their quarters, Rutile took a seat and quietly waited as Euclase carefully selected outfits for her.

“Perhaps this one? No, this one.”

“Chancellor Euclase, we will be doing Lady Rutile’s hair, yes?” asked a maid.

“Indeed,” Euclase confirmed.

“Eek! No, I’ll do it!” interjected one maid.

“No fair. I want to!” another chimed in.

Rutile debated telling the growing pack of maids, who had slipped away from their scheduled tasks, to get back to work, but she decided against it. After all, even if she ordered them to leave, they seemed far too enamored with the goings-on to do so.

“Euclase, could you please make sure the clothes are at least comfortable to wear?” requested Rutile.

“You sometimes have to sacrifice comfort for style,” Euclase declared, pulling out a pair of hard-to-run-in high heels.

At that point, Rutile gave up on being comfortable on this date.

“And to match these shoes, you’ll need this one-piece dress,” Euclase said, holding the dress up to show it off to the maids as well. The dress’s design was rare in the Nation of the Dragon King. It was a clean and graceful-looking number—definitely something worth showing off with confidence as Euclase did.

“Oh my, that dress is simply divine. Your taste is superb, Chancellor Euclase.”

“Yes, indeed. It would be a perfect fit on Lady Rutile’s tall frame.”

The maids’ eyes were glued to the outfit. Euclase snickered in delight at all of their praise.

“It would, wouldn’t it? I had it custom-made by Lady Riccia. This time we’ll hit him with the clean and pretty look.”

“That sounds fine, but Lady Riccia is Ruri’s mother, isn’t she?” asked Rutile.

“That’s right,” Euclase replied. “She apparently worked in the fashion industry in her world. She designs new, never-before-seen outfits, so I’ve been frequenting her boutique. The only problem is that we wind up losing track of time during our clothing chats. Perhaps I should foist the job of chancellor on someone else and have Lady Riccia hire me at her establishment.”

“I’m sure that Claus and the others would have something to say against that,” Rutile said with an awkward smile.

Euclase was so capable as a chancellor that Jade and the entire court viewed them as an invaluable asset. They would most likely combine their forces to stop Euclase from quitting.

“Anyhow, now that I’ve picked an outfit, try it on,” Euclase suggested.

“Do I have to? Right now?”

“Silence! Just wear it!”

Realizing that there was no escape, Rutile reluctantly borrowed the room next door and put on the outfit.

“Okay, I have it on,” she said, stepping back into the room.

“Oh my, it looks fantastic on you. It looks good size-wise as well,” Euclase commented.

“Yes. But these shoes seem hard to run in.”

Thanks to her and Euclase having similar shoe sizes, the heels slipped right on. There was a slight discrepancy in size, but the ever-sturdy dragonkin weren’t subject to blisters from ill-fitting footwear like humans were.

“Oh, come now. You’re always putting too much emphasis on comfort. You’re hardly going to be *running* on a date. I swear, your mind is stuck in the military! Bring it back to being dainty every once in a while. Like yours truly.”

“I don’t think I can be like you, Euclase... I have a feeling Finn would hate it.”

“What do you mean by that, pray tell?” Euclase asked, giving her a death glare.

Rutile swept it under the rug with a slight chuckle. “Okay, now that I’m done prepping, it’s time to go.”

Just as she tried to exit the room, the maids grabbed her by the arms.

“Not yet, Lady Rutile.”

“Yes! There’s still the matter of your hair.”

“Don’t be difficult and let us play with your locks.”

Euclase watched the eager maids hold down Rutile, then let out a smug chuckle and ordered the mob, “Do it.”

“Right away!”

“Very well, Chancellor Euclase!”

The maids all happily inched toward Rutile with combs. Rutile mentally apologized to Finn, knowing that this would be a very time-consuming process.

After they thoroughly primed and prepped Rutile, the maids looked content, and Rutile's hair was nicely and elegantly set.

"What do you think, Chancellor Euclase?" one of them asked.

"Looking nice. This will knock Finn dead," Euclase remarked.

Rutile looked at all of the faces, brimming with a sense of accomplishment, and gave them a wry grin as she prepared to leave the room—and actually leave it this time.

"Thank you. I'll be going now," she said.

Euclase nodded. "Yes, tell me about your date later over drinks."

"Of course."

Rutile then parted ways and hurried to the meeting spot. The unscheduled makeover had eaten up a ton of time, so when she spotted Finn, she ran up to him as fast as she could in the uncomfortable heels and apologized the second she opened her mouth.

"I'm sorry, Finn. I didn't mean to make you wait so long."

"No, that's fine. I heard Euclase nabbed you. You were bound to be indisposed, right?"

"Well, yes. More or less," Rutile said with an ambiguous smile, and Finn sighed in exasperation.

Rutile knew that Euclase had sent someone to inform Finn, and Finn wasn't the type to get mad over someone being late in the first place, but she was relieved to see that this hadn't ruined his mood.

"You seem quite different today," Finn said, intrigued by her aura. He had expected Rutile to be gussied up since he'd experienced Euclase's strange enthusiasm when it came to dates on more than one occasion.

"They said they would hit you with the 'clean and pretty look.'"

"I see. Yes, quite clean and pretty, indeed," Finn said, nodding in agreement.

"Doesn't really suit me, though," Rutile shot back.

"No, I think it looks great on you," Finn insisted as his face relaxed. He gave a

tender smile, and Rutile's lips curled into a smile as well. "Now, let's be off," he said, holding out his hand.

"Yes, let's," Rutile urged, taking it without a second's hesitation.



The capital was abuzz with excitement over the fourier. The first wave had already passed, and there was more yet to come. Because of that, droves of people wandered the capital—much more than usual. Rutile gripped Finn's hand firmly, wanting to avoid the struggle of finding one another if they were to get lost in the crowd.

"Always a slew of people every time, isn't it?" she commented.

"Makes sense considering it only happens once every fifty years. In a way, you couldn't have come back from the Imperial Nation at a better time, Rutile."

"Yes, that's true," Rutile concurred, noting that she would've had to wait another fifty years if she missed this chance. "Still, it seems a lot has happened in the years I've been away."

"True. The biggest difference is probably Ruri, right?"

"I'd say so," she said with a chuckle as she looked around her. There was a ton of fourier merchandise, but there was just as much merchandise with the Beloved's name plastered on it—a true sign that the people of the capital had accepted Ruri. "I never would have dreamed that I would lay eyes on a supreme-level spirit in my lifetime."

Finn's conflicted expression gave Rutile the impression that he had mixed feelings on that subject. "They gather around Ruri for some reason. It has caused His Majesty a lot of grief. Supreme-level spirits need to be treated with even more care than Beloveds."

Supreme-level spirits were practically legendary, and because they operated with a different sense of values than mortals, interacting with them required extreme caution.

"Still," Finn continued, "Ruri has Lord Kotaro and Lady Rin subjugated, and Lady Riccia has the Spirit of Fire by the reins, so there have thankfully been no

major issues.”

“I’m surprised that she has supreme-level spirits *subjugated*.”

“All I can say is that’s Ruri for you. It’s even more reason for us to guard her too. In that respect, it’s a great thing that you’ve come back home, Rutile.”

“Were you her bodyguard this entire time, Finn?”

“At first I was, but it’s mostly Ewan or Joshua taking guard duty nowadays.”

“I can see Joshua doing that, but Ewan? He must have grown considerably if he’s allowed to escort a Beloved.”

To Rutile, Ewan was still just the cute little brother with a lot of growing up to do, so she was honestly impressed that he had been filling such a big role. At the same time, she wondered if Ewan could handle guarding a Beloved considering he still barked at people like a tiny, overprotective dog.

“At first, it was mostly me on guard detail, but he got confrontational with Ruri. It was a terrifying thing to witness back then, but they ended up getting along surprisingly well, and nowadays they’re pretty much friends.”

“Aah, so he *did* butt heads, then,” Rutile said. She figured there was no way that Ewan, with his huge brother complex, wouldn’t react poorly to a woman being next to Finn. After all, he had barked at her so many times in the past, but each time, she had made sure to teach him who he could and couldn’t bark at—the hard way. “Is Ewan as infatuated with you as always?”

“Yes, same as he ever was. I still don’t know why he’s so attached to me,” Finn said, sounding like he found it somewhat endearing. Finn had a soft spot for Ewan, although he himself was oblivious to it.

“Personally, I was able to focus on my work in the Imperial Nation with peace of mind knowing he was over here acting as my guard dog while I was away. You’re popular among women and men,” Rutile said, causing Finn to look slightly astonished. “What is that look for?”

“I just didn’t expect that to come out of *your* mouth.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

“I’m talking about when word got around that we were engaged. Spears and

arrows came flying at me. Magic attacks were launched at me the moment I ran into you. My food became extremely spicy. I faced so much harassment that I simply lost count.”

“That did happen, didn’t it?”

Finn was recalling when they first got engaged. Most people hadn’t even known that they were dating, and everyone thought that they were often together because they were good friends. Neither of them had shown any inklings of romance.

However, quite a lot of people had their eyes on Rutile, so the announcement had triggered sheer pandemonium. Jade was right in saying that she was a natural flirt, because she was even more popular than Finn. The news that they would be wed sent the brunt of everyone’s resentment right at Finn. If he weren’t the second strongest dragonkin after Jade, then he would have long since died from the perils he’d faced every day back then.

On the flip side, Rutile hadn’t received any harassment whatsoever, so she had remained carefree throughout the whole ordeal. She had even laughed while Finn was in the middle of a sneak attack, walking off and jokingly remarking to him to “have fun.” Sure, she’d only done so because she was confident that Finn wouldn’t be harmed, but it wouldn’t have hurt her to help just a little.

“Oh well, that is ancient history. I’m glad you’re safe and sound, Finn,” Rutile said with a sweet smile.

Finn heaved a sigh. “You weren’t flirting over in the Imperial Nation too, now were you?”

“I swear, with His Majesty and you—what do you both take me for? Admittedly, I did receive flowers from a lot of the maids there,” she said with a delighted smile.

“I knew it...” Finn muttered.

“I didn’t have the best time being around all of those stuffy nobles, but everyone else treated me just fine.”

“The Imperial Nation’s nobles, eh? I’m guessing you’re the only one who

could deal with those types smoothly.”

“That isn’t true,” Rutile protested.

“Even so, no one would willingly volunteer. Dealing with them is even harder because the Nation of the Dragon King doesn’t have anything resembling ‘nobles’ or ‘aristocrats.’ Ever since Ruri cropped up here, they have been throwing around a lot of baseless accusations.”

“Yes, they are the only nation of the allied four that doesn’t have a Beloved.”

For the already haughty nobles of the Imperial Nation, they must have felt it was a disgrace that only their nation was devoid of a Beloved. They probably hadn’t cared all of this time because the Nation of the Dragon King had also been without a Beloved for years until Ruri showed up, but now that Ruri was here, the Imperial Nation was the only one of the allied four that could not receive the spirits’ blessings. The fact that the nation was primarily humans and lacked people with mana was also one of their shortcomings.

The Imperial Nation’s nobles had an inferiority complex that stemmed from their lack of power compared to other nations, which was due to their having very few magic-users to their name. Despite that, they claimed to be superior to others, so their mindset was taxing, to say the least. The slightest remark could send them into a frenzy. Adularia was a fantastic emperor for keeping the nobles in line in spite of their temperament—that was Rutile’s honest opinion.

“All we can do is hope that a Beloved shows up in the nation just as Ruri showed up in ours,” Rutile said.

“Yes. That aside, didn’t you say you wanted to go out because there was somewhere you wanted to visit?” asked Finn.

“Yes, there was.”

With that, Rutile led the way to the perfect little spot for weapons and armor. Not a very good place to have a date, but it was one of Rutile’s favorite shops. Finn looked rightfully ambivalent. He’d expected somewhere that couples would frequent when he was told this was a date.

“Is this really the place?” Finn asked.

“Yes, I wanted to buy a new sword,” Rutile answered, giddily skipping into the establishment first.

After letting out a reluctant sigh, Finn also headed inside, looking as though he wanted to point out that this wasn’t very romantic, but it *was* very Rutile.

The weapon shop had absolutely nothing to do with fourier amidst the fourier fever that had overtaken the capital, but a surprising number of people were taking the opportunity to visit the Nation of the Dragon King’s weapon shops.

In the capital, weapons and armor not only contained rare minerals from other lands, but they were made from dragonkin claws and scales as well, both tougher and sturdier than metal. Weapons made from these materials were not available elsewhere, so they were special items that could only be obtained in the royal capital. Many tourists took the opportunity while visiting the Nation of the Dragon King to purchase them.

Among the capital’s weapon shops, this shop in particular had the best reputation for making sturdy products that could withstand a dragonkin’s use. It was Rutile’s favorite stop, but it was also the go-to destination for many dragonkin. Incidentally, Finn’s sword was also from this establishment.

Being regulars, the shopkeeper knew them both by face. When he saw Rutile, he called out to her in a friendly manner, “Ooh. Well, if it isn’t you, Lady Rutile. You’ve made your return from the Imperial Nation, I see.”

“Yes, I arrived back not too long ago,” Rutile replied.

“Then am I to assume that you and Master Finn are on a date right now?”

“Yes, you would be correct,” Rutile said without a moment’s hesitation.

“Ho ho ho ho,” chuckled the shopkeeper in delight. “If this is a date, then you should be somewhere with more ambience. However, as owner of this establishment, I welcome you with open arms.”

The shopkeeper scuttled over to Rutile with a big smile still on his face and whispered, “Thing is, I have some extra-special merchandise that I was going to show to you whenever you dropped by. Interested? All of my selections are good enough to present to His Majesty the Dragon King himself.”

“Then please show me!” Rutile exclaimed.

“Okay, but it’s quite expensive,” added the shopkeeper.

“Put it on Finn’s tab.”

“Rutile...” Finn grumbled, but Rutile paid him no mind and disappeared into the back of the shop with the shopkeeper. Not long after, she returned with a new longsword in hand, a satisfied smile across her face.

“Finn, he had some incredible swords. I’m getting this one!”

“I see...”

Rutile looked at the sword in her hands with such joy that she was liable to hum a ditty at any second. It warmed Finn’s heart to see her so delighted, but as soon as the shopkeeper slipped Finn the bill and Finn looked at the total, he felt his head spin for a second.

“Is this the right amount?” he asked, incredulous.

“Yes, sir,” the shopkeeper confirmed.

“You don’t have a digit wrong?”

“No, sir. It’s right as rain.”

Finn was left speechless.



“A small price to pay considering it’s a present for your dear fiancée after reuniting for the first time in years,” the shopkeeper insisted in a devilish whisper.

Admitting defeat, Finn pulled out his wallet.

With her newly acquired, high-quality sword in hand, Rutile thanked Finn for footing the bill.

“Thank you very much, Finn.”

“Think nothing of it.”

While it hurt to part with so much money in one go, Finn decided to put it out of mind because it made Rutile happy—though he noted he might need to cut back on his spending for a while.

Afterward, the two walked around the bustling town and enjoyed their date like a regular couple.

Once Rutile returned to the castle, she joyfully showed Euclase her spoils for the day, the brand-new sword, but Euclase scolded her in return.

“You should be asking for jewelry or accessories on a date, dummy!”

“But don’t you think a sword is better than jewels?” Rutile asked.

“Yes, it simply screams you, but I think I can see why you two haven’t made any progress toward actually marrying,” Euclase remarked.

“I don’t think those two things correlate.”

“I personally wanted to hear something a little more scandalous from you, but I don’t see that happening for quite some time. Finn truly is the only one who can handle you.”

“Um, thank you very much?”

“That is *not* a compliment!” Euclase snapped, fiercely correcting Rutile’s naivety.

Side Story: Gibeon and the Reapers

Was this the end? His mother had risked everything to help him get away, but was he just going to die here, helplessly on the side of the road? On the other hand, if it would release him from this suffering, then maybe that would be for the best.

With so much regret and frustration weighing down on him, Gibeon's consciousness started to fade, until...

"Heeey, are you alive?" asked a lax voice.

Gibeon tried to move his mouth to tell the person to just leave him alone, but it came out as gibberish barely above a whisper.

"Le...me...be..."

"Ooh, you *are* still alive!"

"Leader~! What are you doing here in this backstreet?"

It seemed that someone else had arrived, but it was none of Gibeon's concern.

"I found one on the ground."

"Ah, jeez. You had to go and find another one. Yeesh, are they alive?"

"Barely. On death's door."

"Well, what're we going to do about them?"

"We gotta bring 'em back with us."

"There goes that bad habit of yours again. This after you've been taking in nothing but girls as of late too."

"Give me a break. I can't just leave 'em once I see 'em."

Gibeon thought that the back-and-forth happening over his half-dead body was annoying, but he lacked the strength to speak up.

Just then, Gibeon felt water slowly drizzle into his mouth. Despite his heart giving way to the thought of death, his body instinctively started moving his throat to take in the liquid. With each satisfying gulp, the water revitalized the half-dead Gibeon as if new life were coursing through his body.

“Drink slowly,” the man insisted.

Gibeon’s cries telling him to stop never even left his mouth as the man called “leader” saved his life. He then passed out on the spot.

When Gibeon next awoke, he was lying in a soft bed. He was still lacking the strength to move on his own, but he was indeed alive. As he reeled from the shock of still being able to draw breath, a figure approached him.

“Heya, kid. Awake?”

It was a withered, middle-aged man with a full, shaggy beard. To say he looked put together would be a flat-out lie.

Gibeon glared at the man as he started to realize that the man’s voice sounded faintly familiar. It belonged to the same man who’d saved him from nearly dying. Though his body was immobile, his mouth worked well enough to reply back.

“Why did you save me?” Gibeon asked, his tone resentful for the favor he never asked for. “A little longer and I could have finally died.”

The man walked over to Gibeon and flicked his forehead.

“Yowch!” Gibeon cried in pain.

The man chuckled. “Keh heh heh, if it hurts, it means you’re alive.”

“But I *wanted* to die,” Gibeon argued.

“That so? Coulda sworn I heard you say you wanted to live.”

“I didn’t say that,” Gibeon refuted. Of course he wouldn’t say that. He had already given up the notion of living any longer.

“No, you definitely wanted to live. It’s true because I said so.”

Gibeon had no words. He lay there speechless as the man then came up to him and put a dagger into his hands. Clueless as to what the old man was trying

to do, Gibeon let him move his body as he pleased—or rather, Gibeon was not able to resist due to his weakened state. The man held both of Gibeon's hands so that the dagger was facing Gibeon himself. It was only a dagger, but Gibeon couldn't even support its weight on his own. The man's hands around his was the only reason he could hold the dagger firm.

"Well? You want to die, right? Stab this right here and you'll get your wish," the man said, bringing the tip of the dagger above Gibeon's heart.

Gibeon's heart was pounding like mad.

"You don't want to suffer, so stab nice and quick," the man said, stopping the dagger's point a hair's breadth away from his chest. "C'mon, all you need to do is put some strength into it. Should be simple."

As simple as it might be, Gibeon's hands remained frozen.

"Hurry up. Didn't you say you wanted to die?"

"Ngh..."

That was right. The man was absolutely right. Gibeon had already lost his homeland and was forced to live life all on his own. He should have died along with his country, just like his mother and father had. He didn't deserve to live, so life needed to end. Nevertheless, for some reason, he couldn't push the dagger any farther.

"Kuh... Urgh..." Gibeon grimaced as his hands could do nothing but tremble. He was the one who wanted to die so badly, so why was he being so hesitant now? One stab would make his wish come true.

"If you can't do it on your own, I'll help you out," the man said as he slowly pushed on Gibeon's hands from above.

The dagger's tip poked through his skin and dug into the meat, sending pain coursing through his body. It was only a matter of time before the knife would skewer his heart.

Gibeon did indeed have a death wish, but the only thing that coursed through his head at the moment was the vestige of his mother's face, wearing the same smile she had up until she met her end.

"You must live."

His mother's final words echoed in his mind. Before he even noticed it, he was using the last of his power to push the man's hands away and drop the dagger.

"See? You want to live."

"Urk... Guh..." Gibeon didn't know why, but tears started to stream from his face.

"Living isn't so bad. Try pushing through a little more." The man rustled Gibeon's hair as he tried to choke back his tears. "Sure, there'll be bad times, but there'll be times so good that you'll celebrate still being alive."

"Don't talk like you know me," Gibeon croaked.

"True, I don't. But you don't know what life has to offer. Don't give up on living so young."

The man sat by Gibeon's side, patting his head, until he eventually stopped crying.



After the strange middle-aged man took him in, Gibeon went to work for him, but he wasn't the only one to do so. Scores of others the man had taken in worked under him, and they referred to him as "Leader."

"So why do they call the leader, well, 'Leader'?" Gibeon asked one of his comrades.

After a grueling month, Gibeon had regained enough strength to come out of the room and meet with the leader's comrades. He was happily welcomed into the fold, perhaps because everyone else had similar circumstances as well. Not much time had passed, but Gibeon felt a comfortable sense of warmth staying with these people, like he had with his family long ago.

Gibeon was with Kiel, the one closest in age to him and the one tasked with being his educator. Kiel too was someone the leader had taken in.

"Let me ask you this. Do you know of the Reapers?" Kiel asked.

"The Reapers are that guild of assassins, right?" Gibeon guessed. He had

heard rumors of them when he was still prince of his nation. They said that once the group set their sights on someone, they were as good as dead.

“So yeah, those Reapers are us,” Kiel explained.

“Are you pulling my leg?” Gibeon questioned.

“Nope. I’m dead serious.”

Gibeon looked around him, and everyone else’s lips were curled into devious smiles. “Huh? Are you *seriously* ‘dead serious’?”

“What did I just get finished telling you?”

Gibeon’s face twitched in panic, but who could blame him? “Then the leader is the boss of the Reapers?”

Kiel nodded. “That’s the gist of it.”

“*What?* Then this place is bad news, and I’m here in the thick of it!”

Maybe it was because he had worked a lot with Kiel, but Gibeon’s speech had started to take after him. That was how well he was fitting in here.

His days of being on guard and vigilant like a stray dog had come to an end, but he was fine with that given he felt so comfortable where he was. Part of that had to do with being around other displaced people with situations similar to his, but the biggest reason was because the leader was extremely accepting. He relied on instinct, was empathetic, loved people, and never abandoned a person in need. He was the definition of a good-natured individual. All the others adored him too because they owed him their lives.

It was that demeanor of his that had healed Gibeon’s ravaged heart, and while Gibeon wouldn’t admit it outright, he loved the leader. He had never seen someone so nice before in his life. Hearing that he was the boss of the Reapers wasn’t clicking for him.

“Huh? Then do you mean the reason the leader takes some of the senior members out on occasion is because...” Gibeon trailed off.

“He takes requests,” Kiel finished. “There’s no way he could feed a family this big by just working normally.”

“Requests...? Assassination requests?”

“More or less.”

“H-He kills people? The leader?” Gibeon stammered in sheer disbelief. He didn’t think the leader was capable of killing.

Kiel smiled awkwardly. “Well, yeah. On the surface, at least.”

“On the surface?” Gibeon repeated, cocking his head.

“Do you think the leader can kill someone?”

“Not at all,” replied Gibeon. It hadn’t been that long since he had started living with the leader. He might get asked what he actually knew about the leader, but he would say with certainty that the old man was incapable of harming a hair on anyone’s head.

“Yeah, I feel the same.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Gibeon needed more clarification in order to make heads or tails of what he meant.

“This stays between us, but the leader gets paid to help people out.”

“He what? Aren’t the Reapers a guild of assassins?”

“The job he took this time was for a person trying to get his daughter out of the country by faking her death to avoid the noble who’s after her. Dealing with noblemen is so messy that if he doesn’t fake her death, they’ll come chasing after her.”

“He can’t just get her out of the country?” Gibeon questioned.

“If he were to just help her flee the country, then who knows what kind of harassment the nobles would dish out on the family she leaves behind? But if she were killed by the Reapers, then they wouldn’t want to get themselves implicated, so they won’t come messing with her family.”

“Ah, I see.” Gibeon was convinced that it was indeed an effective way of eluding noblemen. It was essentially running off in the night to leave your past life behind, but with a few extra steps.

“They’re from a pretty big merchant family,” Kiel added, “so we’re all excited

about the reward.”

“Does any of that play into why he’s out killing chickens right now?” Gibeon was curious as to why he and the few others in the yard were killing chickens and draining their blood.

“It sure as heck does. He’s going to use chicken blood as a stand-in for human blood and splash it all over the room. That’ll make it look like a gruesome murder scene. This time we’re using chickens, but sometimes we use pigs.”

“Is there some kinda difference?”

“Depends on what the leader wants on the menu. Today he’s in the mood for chicken.”

“Oh, gimme a break...” Gibeon shoulders slumped in disappointment. He thought there was some special meaning, but it was ultimately meaningless. He could feel his image of the terrifying band of killers known as the Reapers crumbling into bits.

“Anyway, that’s what the ‘guild of assassins,’ the Reapers, really do,” Kiel finished.

“Yeah, I get it,” Gibeon said with a nod. “It’s so like the leader.”

“Yeah, ain’t it?”

Killing people without actually killing them in order to save them—that was very much in line with the leader’s personality, according to Gibeon. Along with that, he was relieved to hear that the leader had never killed a single person. Gibeon was sure that he wasn’t the only one who thought the leader wasn’t suited toward bloodshed either.

“Say, what is Amarna doing over there, laughing like a creep?” Gibeon asked, looking over at the young girl who the leader had taken in two months prior to himself.

“Guh hee hee hee,” she sickeningly snickered to herself, which she’d been doing for quite some time now. She was also counting in a creepy manner.

“Oooone, twooo...”

“Aah, that’s the advance for the job. Leader told her to count it to see if the

amount was right. And you know how much Amarna loves money.”

“Yeah, but she’s so creepy about it.”

Ching, ching. The coins jangled as Amarna placed each one in the bottle, one by one, giggling in delight at the noise. “Geh hee hee hee, I love the sound of money~!”

“Okay, I’ll admit, it is kind of creepy,” Kiel said.

“I can hear her counting money from her room in the middle of the night too. It’s chilling,” Gibeon stated, referencing the fact that his and Amarna’s rooms were right next to each other. He could hear her clear as a whistle through the thin walls, and hearing her in the dead of night was doubly scary. “I seriously want a room change. On the first day, I was about to wet myself because I thought that I was hearing ghosts.”

“Oh, yeah. I guess that would be scary at night. But we’ve got no other rooms, so buck up.”

“In that case, swap with me, Kiel.”

“Not on your life. You know how spooky that crap is.”

Gibeon gave him the stink eye, but Kiel wasn’t about to crack from something as simple as that.

“Heey, could someone go out and go shopping?!” asked the leader, coming back inside from his work out in the yard—covered head to toe in blood for some reason.

“Gyah!” Kiel shouted. “Leader, you’re drenched in blood!”

“Did you finally actually kill someone?!” cried Gibeon.

“You got it all wrong! I accidentally spilled a bucket of blood on my head. We’re short on blood because of it, so I need you guys to buy some more chickens.”

Just then, Amarna rushed over to the leader. “What are you doing, sir?! Being scatterbrained is reserved for cute children only. You’re a fully grown adult, so you should have more of a grip! You’re wasting my money!”

“C’mon, it’s everyone’s money. Don’t go pocketing any of it, now. Maybe I shouldn’t have left you to count the money.”

“Why don’t you just dissolve some red paint in water?” Amarna suggested, her face lighting up like she had a brilliant revelation.

“No, they’d catch on to that right away,” the leader said.

“Gaaaargh!” Amarna screamed, holding her head in her hands. “These needless expenses are piling uuuup!”

“Calm down. Calm down. We’re not going bankrupt over a chicken or two. I’ll file the expenses with the client later,” the leader said, trying to draw in the reins.

Amarna simply glared back at him. “You better. And don’t you lose a single coin!”

“I got it. I got it. Just go and buy me some more chickens. There. Gibeon over there looks like he’s free. Get him to do it.”

“Aww, what?” Gibeon made a sour face after he unluckily met eyes with the leader.

“No, I’ll go! Gibeon isn’t reliable enough. The owner of the butcher shop will swindle him easily!” Amarna insisted.

Gibeon liked that Amarna would go in his place, but he didn’t like her reason. “I can handle shopping! Quit looking down on me!”

“Hah! A mere child wouldn’t understand the profound depths of shopping!” Amarna said, mocking and laughing at Gibeon.

“Oh, brother. I don’t wanna hear that from a miserly cheapskate like you.”

“I am *not* a cheapskate. I just love money more than anything else in the world!”

“That’s what we call a cheapskate!”

As Gibeon and Amarna bickered, everyone around them walked away as if to say, “Oh boy, here they go again.” They didn’t get along with each other, and despite being close in age, they would incessantly argue whenever anything

popped up.

“For crying out loud, I don’t care which of you goes, but could ya hurry and go?” the leader said.

“Aah, fine. I’ll go, sir,” said Kiel, raising his hand.



Living with the Reapers meant that Gibeon had no permanent residence. He was regularly moving from place to place since they would be spotted if they stayed somewhere too long. That life, moving from land to land, was very fulfilling.

The name of the Reapers was known everywhere they went. Whenever word of another murder went out, Gibeon and his friends would look at each other and laugh because they knew the truth. Each person who was supposedly killed was living out a new life in faraway lands.

Setting up the foundation of their lives after the escape was also a part of the Reapers’ job. It was the Reapers’ motto to provide great service even after the job was through. Gibeon was proud of the Reapers and was proud to be a part of them, but sometimes he felt dissatisfied.

“It’s kinda annoying that people say the leader is out killing and maiming when he’s actually doing a world of good, y’know,” Gibeon commented.

Kiel awkwardly grinned while Amarna made a pouty face.

“Yeah, that’s what everyone thinks,” Kiel said.

“It pisses me off to be in the same boat as some snot-nosed brat, but I feel the same,” Amarna spat.

Gibeon, Kiel, and Amarna had all been saved and taken in by the leader. If it weren’t for him, they would have lost their lives a long time ago. Their feelings for him were stronger than anything else.

“But since he’s okay with it, there ain’t much we can say about it,” Kiel pointed out.

“That pisses me off too. Why do you keep letting them say that stuff?” Gibeon protested.

“Well, for the sake of the people he’s saved, y’know?”

If word got out that their leader had saved those people, their pursuers would know that they were alive, which would effectively negate his efforts. Even though Gibeon knew that, he couldn’t help but dislike the fact that those not in the know feared the Reapers.

“But the leader is such a great guy...” Gibeon said.

“We all know that. And so do the people whom he has saved so far. Just bear with it,” Kiel instructed.

“I know!”

Gibeon wanted the leader’s escapades to be made public one day. It wasn’t likely one would find a person so willing to work for the sake of others. He definitely deserved more public recognition. Indeed, one day. Sadly, before that day could arrive, the leader unexpectedly died. He had been ill, and the illness had progressed so fast that it was too late by the time he noticed it.

Perhaps the dragonkin’s medicine could have saved him, but it wasn’t something that one could obtain at a moment’s notice. Still, unable to give up on their leader, the group had concocted a plan to sneak into the Dragon King’s castle that held the elixir. It was obvious that an item as rare as dragonkin medicine would be strictly guarded, and if they were caught, they probably would face death, but it would be worth it if it meant the leader had a chance to live.

Not a single person in the group was opposed to the idea—except one. The leader had overheard Gibeon and the others whispering about their plans.

“There’s no need for you to risk your lives to save me and what little time I have left,” the leader said, driving his point home.

Naturally, everyone objected. No one was more important to them than the leader. They couldn’t possibly sit idly by and watch his health deteriorate. Although the leader understood how they felt—no, because he understood how they felt—he couldn’t possibly ask them to risk danger on his behalf.

“Could you all spend whatever time I have left together with me instead?” he asked, stating the wish that would cost him his life.

Everyone tearfully agreed. Time passed with things proceeding very peacefully. No one spoke of the leader's illness; they simply played, celebrated, and laughed as if nothing were wrong. And the leader watched them all with a smile as time ticked on.

"Live strong even after I'm gone," the leader said before closing his eyes to rest. He looked so peaceful that it was hard to believe he'd been ill.

Thinking of how his gentle eyes would never open again, everyone clung to the leader's body and wept.

After staying next to their leader's remains for days on end, the most senior member of the group finally spoke to the mourners. "Let's put the leader to rest."

As the leader had wished before his death, they decorated a plot with flowers, dug a grave, and placed him inside.

"I'm sure he'll be able to rest easy here," Gibeon said, looking at the area surrounded by blooms. For the savior of so many people, it wasn't a bad spot for his eternal sleep.

One by one, people prayed for the leader's soul to rest in peace and walked away. They had discussed what they would do with the Reapers from now on, although that point didn't need discussing. They could only be the Reapers with their leader around. Without him, they would be Reapers in name only. By unanimous decision, they decided to disband.

After that, Gibeon's comrades, who had all gathered under the leader, went their separate ways in order to fulfill the old man's last words and "live strong." And although the close-knit group of people were all on their separate journeys now, the bond that their leader helped build remained intact. Even apart, the pride of the former Reapers would never die.

That being said, Gibeon had been living carefree with the Reapers for so long that he reached an impasse, choosing a less scrupulous path that would have earned him a fist to the head if the leader were still alive. However, through an unforeseen stroke of luck, the Dragon King had taken him in. Every day, he was reminded that one truly didn't know what life had in store for them.



One day, Gibeon went to the capital by himself, to meet a certain someone.

“Hey, Amarna,” he said as he greeted her.

Amarna, who was working as a store vendor, went from all smiles to all frowns all at once. “What might you want, you snot-nosed brat?”

“Yeah, nice to see you too, cheapskate...”

“If you’re here to sling insults, then be gone. You’re disrupting business,” Amarna said, waving her hand to shoo Gibeon away.

“You seem to be friends with Ruri, but does she know that you used to be part of the Reapers?”

“Why would she know? There’s no need for me to tell her.”

“Hmm...”

“Is that all you came to speak about?”

“Have you...seen the others?” Gibeon asked, referring to the other Reapers he hadn’t seen ever since the group’s disbandment.

“No, I haven’t. What about you, Gibeon?”

“Yeah, me neither.”

“What in the world did you even come here for?” Amarna said, sighing in exasperation.

“Nothing really. Just curious,” he replied.

“So I see.”

“But, y’know, I wonder if everyone else is alive and well.”

“I’m sure they’re all fine. You’re still alive and well, and you’re the biggest problem child out of the bunch.” Miffed by her remark, Gibeon was about to retort back, but Amarna continued. “All of us remember the leader’s final words well.”

“Live strong even after I’m gone.”

The rest of the Reapers were probably following those words to the letter,

living healthy and robust lives.

“Yeah... You’re right,” Gibeon said.

“If you’re not going to buy anything, would you mind scurrying along? You’re disrupting business.”

“I’ll be back.”

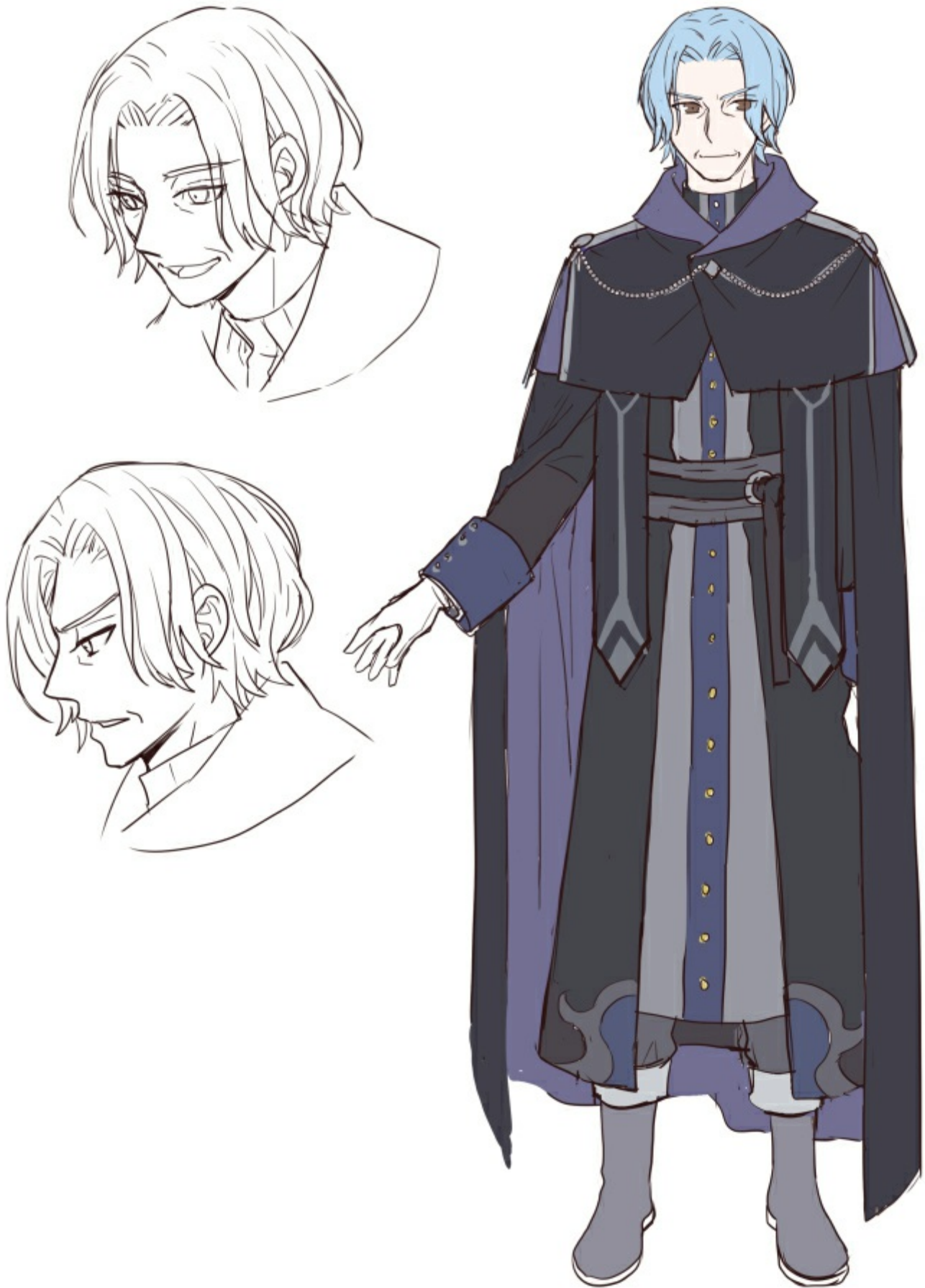
“Yes, well, if you’re a paying customer, then you’re more than welcome back.”

Dismayed by Amarna’s typical reply, Gibeon made his way back to the castle—his new home.

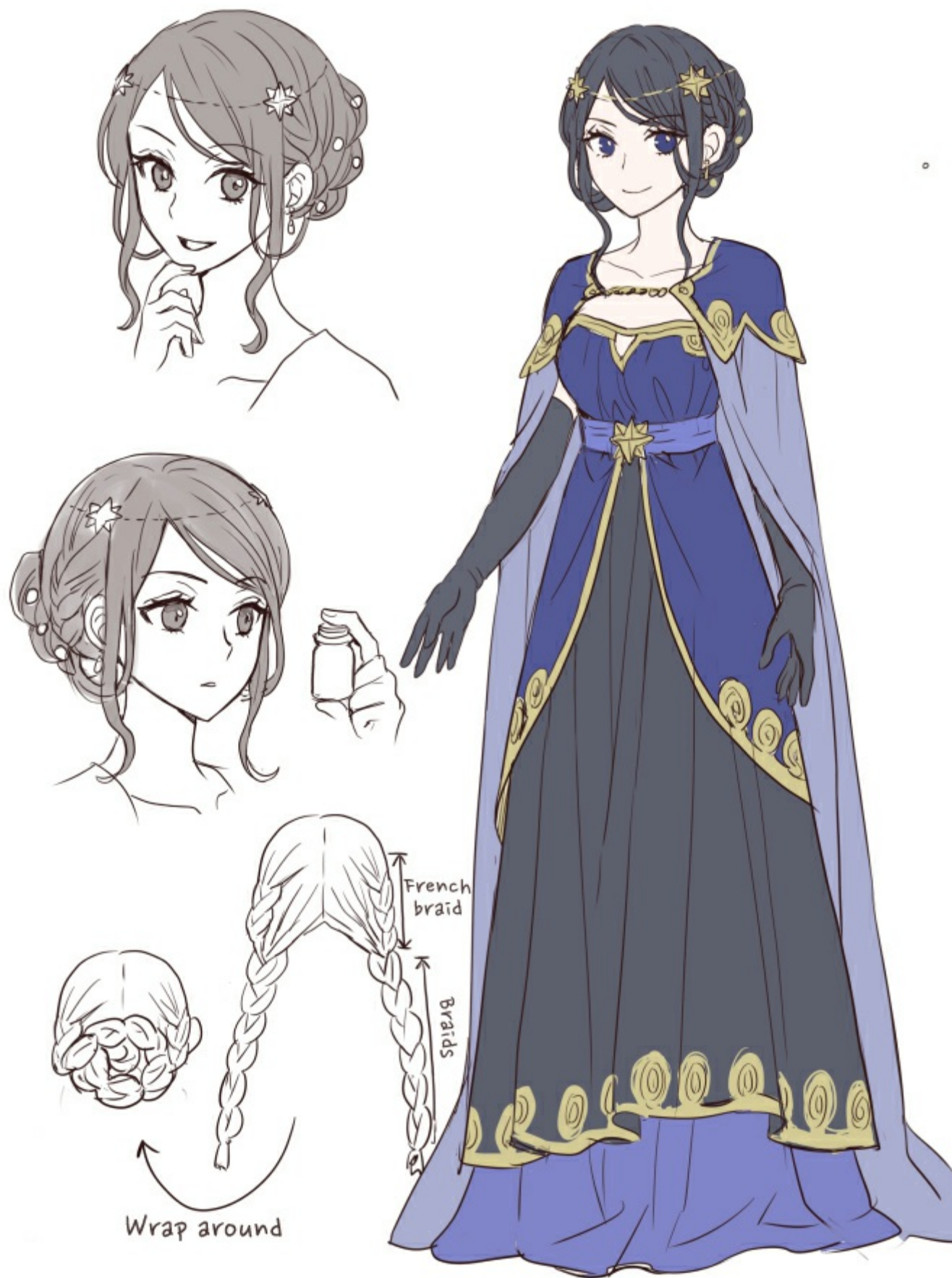
Orio



Corundum



Pearl



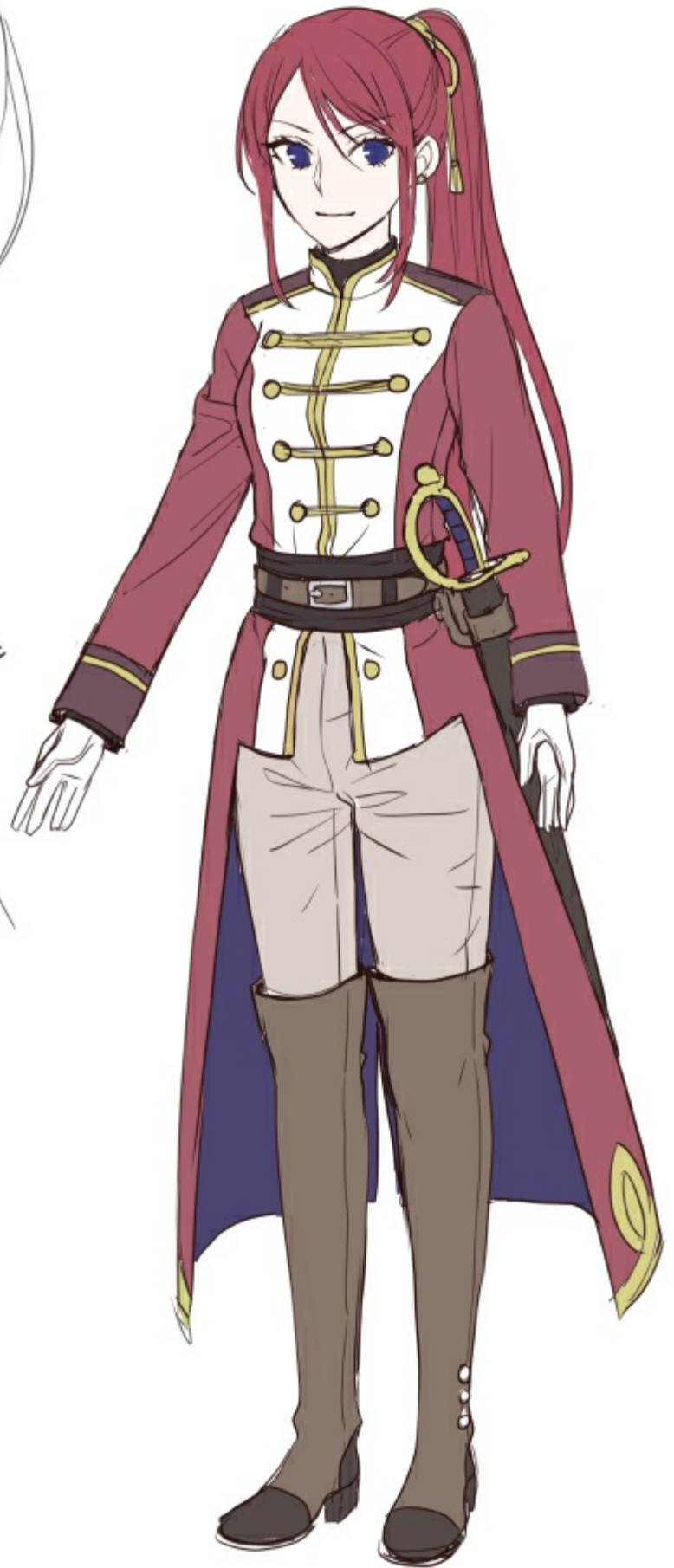
Rutile



Small
earrings in
both ears



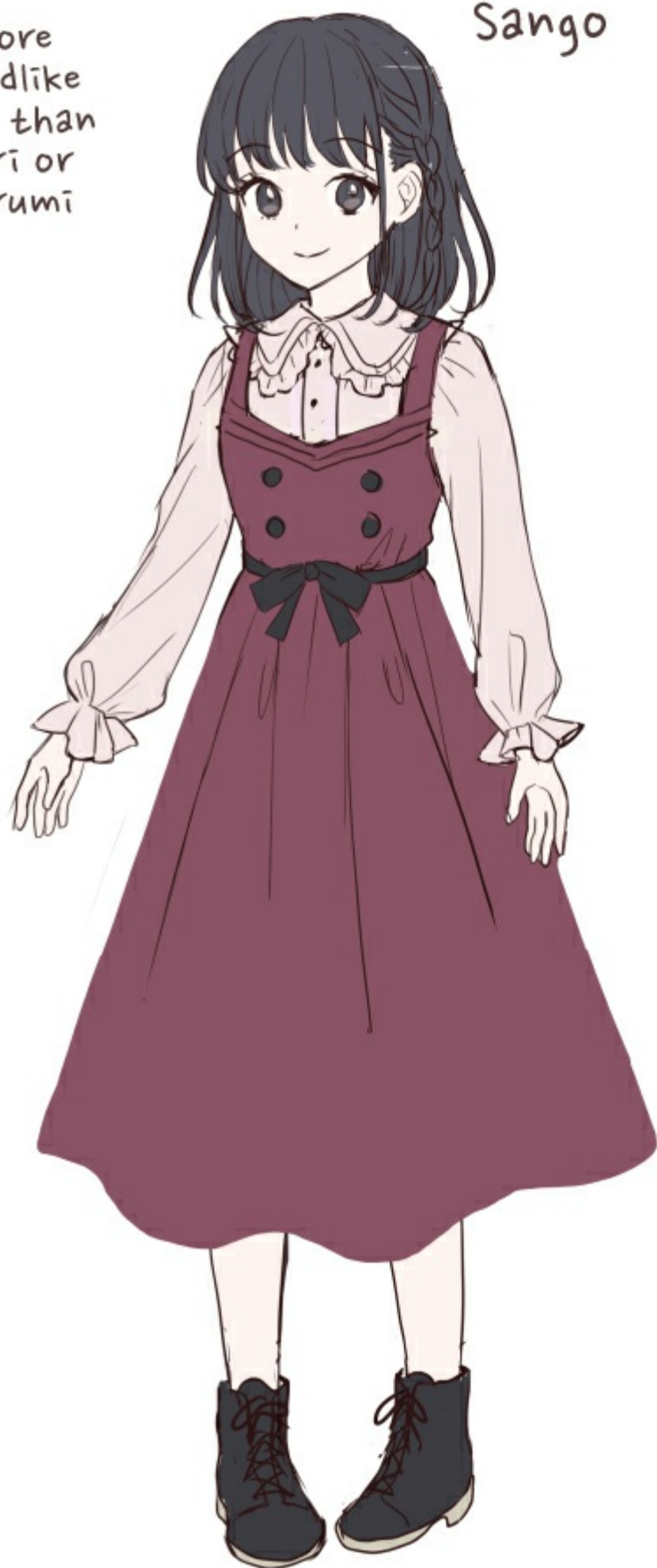
Glint





More
childlike
face than
Ruri or
Kurumi

Sango



Hmph!



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by Kureha

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